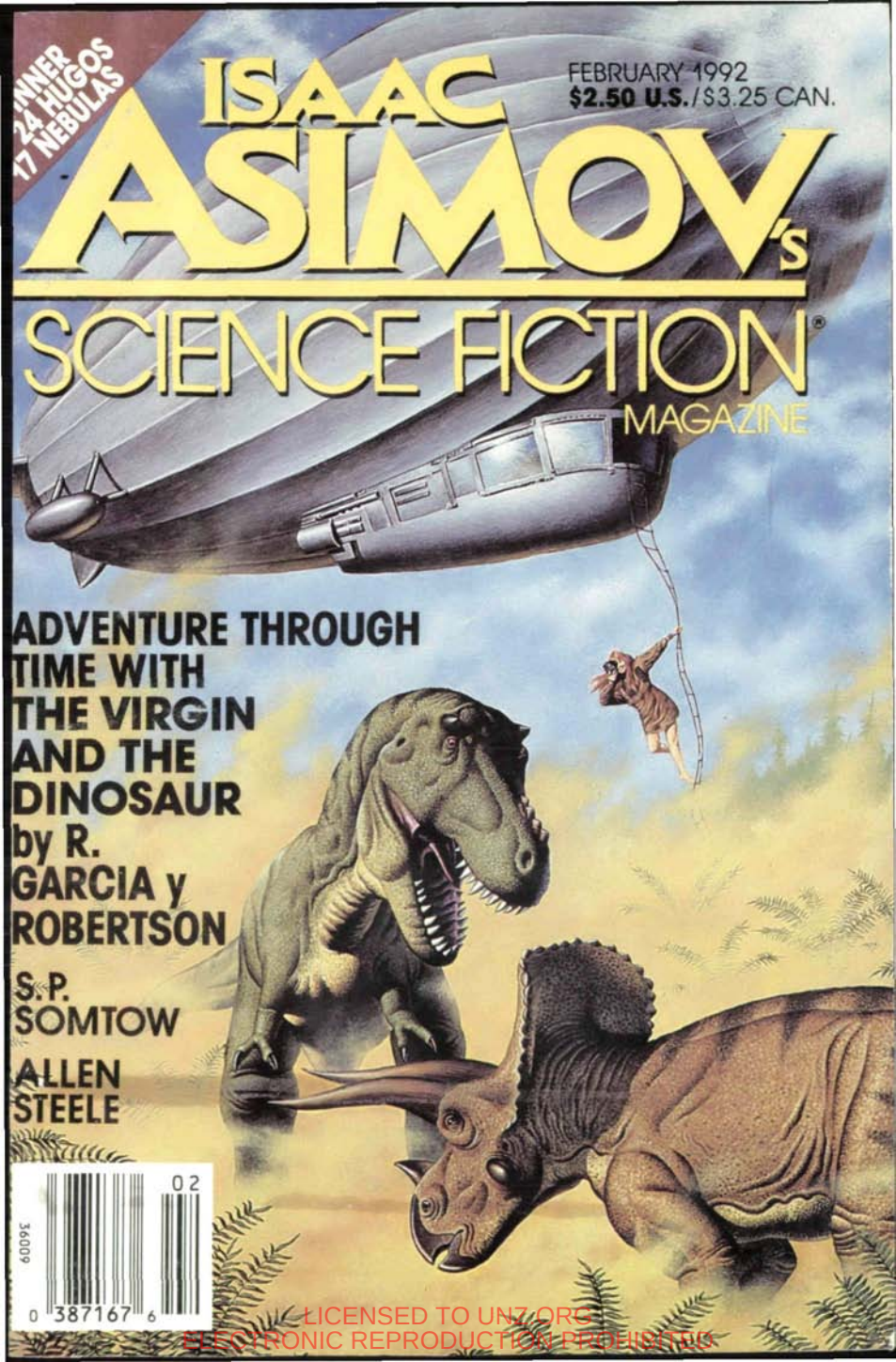


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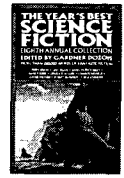


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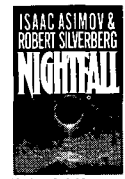


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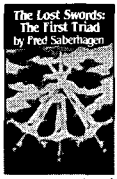


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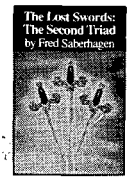


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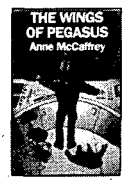


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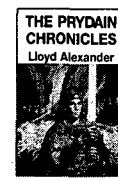


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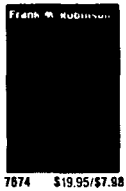

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# ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

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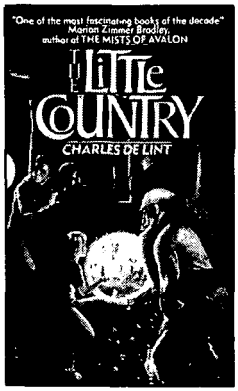
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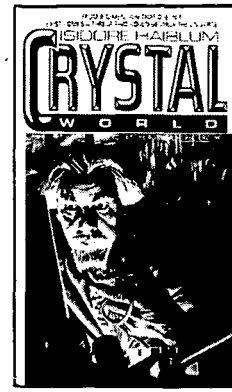


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# EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

## FREEDOM

I received an interesting letter the other day. It was from someone who very much enjoyed my writing. Consequently, when she heard that there was a magazine with my name on it (the very one you are holding in your hand right now) she rushed out to buy a copy.

The result was that she was horrified, simply horrified. It seems she has a nine-year-old daughter and there is nothing in the house that is unfit for her to read. (What a dull house!) And behold, she could not be allowed to read my magazine.

Well, now, the fact of the matter is this. *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* is not written for nine-year-old girls. Undoubtedly, when the young lady is a few years older she will want to read it and will enjoy it tremendously, but right now she's not quite old enough.

There are plenty of books and magazines in the world for nine-year-old girls and the mother should have no difficulty in finding them and giving them to her daughter. But please let her stay away from this magazine, which happens to be written for adults.

I am, as a matter of fact, pretty sick of adults who must protect their children from all sorts of terrible things and who insist, therefore, that the whole world join them in the protection. When *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* came out there were indignant letters from mothers whose dear and precious four-year-olds were frightened by the witch, so Disney was forced to dumb down his cartoons to avoid offending four-year-olds.

I remember once sitting in a gathering of dear, protective mothers, and one of them said, "Why do we have all this horrible material for children to read now? Why can't they read the nice fairy tales we used to read when we were young?"

I promptly rose and said I would make up a fairy tale for them. I told a story about a poor woodcutter who was living through a famine and who had no choice but to abandon his two children so that they might starve to death. And this he did, at his wife's insistence, and the children wandered disconsolately through the woods till they met up with a cannibal witch who was going to fatten them up and eat them. However, the girl



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shoved her into her own stove and they got away and found their way home where their wicked mother had died and their father took them back.

The women were all horrified at this tale of starvation and cannibalism and especially at my description of the wicked mother. I said, "Why, the name of the story is *Hansel and Gretel* and it is one of our most popular fairy tales."

The fact of the matter is that if you read the old fairy tales you will find that they are a lot Grimmer (if you don't mind the pun) than anything you can read about now. Why, then, do we remember them with such love?

I think it's just a matter of stupid mothers who have once read them and forgotten them.

The same woman who wouldn't have anything in the house that wasn't fit for her nine-year-old daughter (who'll probably pick up all she'll have to know in school and on the streets) is also very much against freedom.

She scolds me rather harshly for belonging to a group that supports religious freedom. She was under the impression that I had a lot of nerve supporting religious freedom—or all the other freedoms that I think are great things.

Well, in the first place, there's no point in arguing with me over that. She had better argue with the Bill of Rights and, in particular, with the first amendment, in which Congress is forbidden to set up an established church, or to, in any

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way, infringe on freedom of speech, of press and of the right of assembly.

It's not a bad amendment as far as I'm concerned, but I imagine that to my correspondent, it is the work of heck. (I better not say "hell" or her nine-year-old daughter will be shocked.)

I wonder, then, if she's against freedom of speech, what speech would she prefer we not make use of. What are the only things we'll be allowed to say so that she and her nine-year-old daughter can feel good about things? Does she have a list of words we must not use? A list of concepts? A list of theories?

That goes for freedom of the press, too. If she doesn't want that freedom, is she willing to set up hard and fast rules about what can be printed and what cannot be printed? Is she intelligent enough to find a way of freezing our newspapers, magazines, and books so that they will not say anything that she personally would find offensive?

And the freedom to assemble for the redress of grievances. We don't want that, either, do we? The best thing is to assume there are no grievances and therefore no need for redress. Of course, our lady correspondent has a grievance and she's demanding redress in a good loud voice, but that's *her* problem. The rest of us can just cower under the table and raise no ruckus.

And that leaves freedom of religion, which she is very much against. That's too bad because I don't know what religion she is pleased with and would like all of us to have. Does she want us all to be Mormons? Hard-shell Baptists? Catholics? Jews? Episcopalians? What?

If you don't want freedom of religion then you want *one* religion that everyone will observe, and I can't help but wonder if she just happens to have (by sheer luck) the one religion she thinks is suitable. I think she ought to tell us what it is so that the rest of us won't worry too much about it and brood over the necessity of changing our own religion in order to get it into line with hers.

Alas, alas, for thee and me that we live in a land in which freedom has been won (not without a lot of trouble) and in which we can feel proud of our Bill of Rights, and yet find ourselves in a land in which there are people who want to throw it all away.

And why? So they can have the kind of society that suits them and get rid of all other kinds. So that they don't have to look at people whose appearance is not like their own; so that they don't have to listen to people whose accent is not like their own; so that they don't have to associate with people whose views are not like their own.

My friend ends her letter by saying that she still loves my older books and will re-read them, but will not read my new ones or my magazine or anything with my



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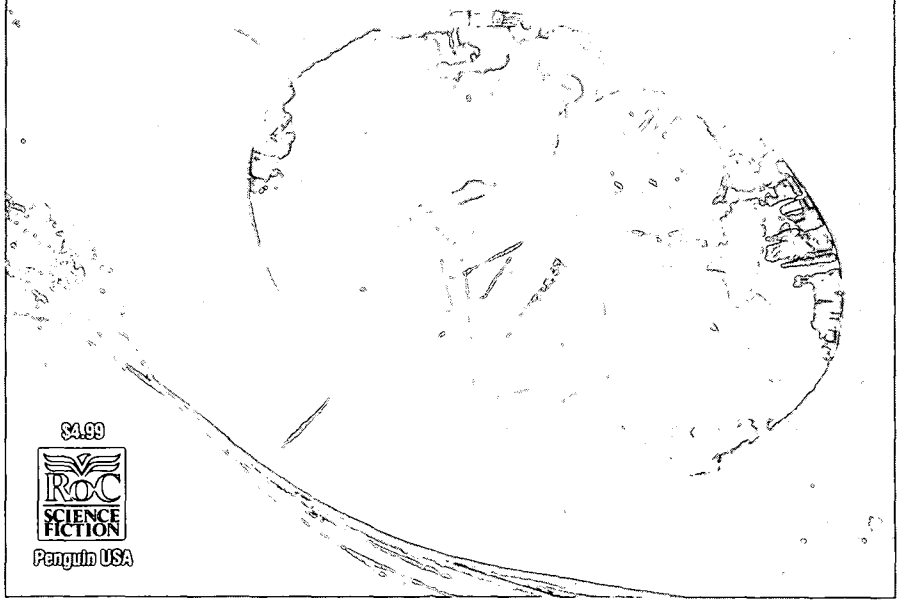

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name on it, because she is looking for new heroes.

Well, I hope I don't displease her too much, but I hope she finds her new heroes, because I don't want to be her hero. I would find it insulting.

In fact, I would very much rather that she did not read my old books, either, for in those old books, I'm all for freedom, as I am now, and I would simply be annoying her.

Come to think of it, I suspect I would enjoy annoying her.

I see I have some space left, so I might as well list a few letters I have received lately that have gone straight into the wastebasket. There is always the hope that people will stop sending them.

1) There is the letter that says, in block printing, "If you will send me your autograph, I will send you mine." I know it is meant to be funny, but it does not raise a smile, I'm afraid.

2) There is the letter that sends me five or six cards which represent statements I have made here and there in my writing and the person who sends them wants me to sign each one so that he can give them as gifts to his friends. Sorry. I may be a curmudgeon, but I fail to see why his friends should want them, so I send them back unsigned.

3) There is the letter, in block printing, that starts "My name is Fortescue Z. Quackenbush. I am in the fifth grade, and my teacher wants me to write to someone for an autograph." If they have to be told to write, I'm not interested.

4) There is the letter that bubbles over with enthusiasm and wants an autograph because they are "my greatest fan" and have read "all my books." However, they don't name a single book they've read so I throw it out.

5) There is the letter from a fellow who knows I am very busy and must get millions of letters like this, but just the same he's taking the liberty of writing to ask for an autograph. Well, he's right, I'm very busy and get millions of letters like this, and his gets thrown out along with all the rest.

6) I won't even begin to talk about those who want signed photographs, and those who want me to read over their manuscripts of a thousand pages and give them a closely reasoned critique. All out. All out. ●

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# LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I'm disturbed by the recent complaints by writers about not receiving personal rejections from SF editors. Editors simply have too much to do, especially at the larger magazines, to send personal responses to every submission.

I'm a full-time free-lance writer for nonfiction magazines, and I'm trying to crack the SF market with my fiction. I've spent countless hours studying markets, researching how to market my stories, writing, and rewriting, etc. If I've learned anything, I've discovered that editors don't owe me anything (that is, unless they want to buy my story). It may be cold, as one writer recently complained in *IAsfm,* but that's the way it is. And the sooner we as writers understand that, the less grief we'll go through.

If your story shows enough promise, editors will normally let you know that you're close. I've received several positive, personal rejections in the past few months, and I appreciate the time those editors took to let me know what they think. But an editor's first responsibility is to the reader, not to the writer; if the editor has to choose between spending time working to make the magazine better or making sure young writers are properly inspired, the editor better work on the magazine. Writers can inspire themselves.

But that doesn't mean there's no hope for would-be writers. Join a local writers' group. Create a writing group of your own. Seek out critiques from people whose opinions you respect—not your mom or your brother, but people who will look at your story with a critical eye. And by all means join the Science Fiction & Fantasy Workshop, which was created to give would-be SF/fantasy/horror writers a chance to exchange critiques (among other things). SF&FW consists of hundreds of writers willing to do exactly what so many writers want editors to do: tell us what's wrong with our stories.

And before you say to yourself, "What does anybody in SF&FW know?" consider this: many of our members are published authors, including Mary Rosenblum, who's sold several stories to *IAsfm.*

For more information about SF&FW, write to Kathleen Woodbury, Director, 1193 South 1900 East, Salt Lake City, UT 84108. And please quit pestering editors with your pleas that nobody will help you learn to write.

Carl W. Grody
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*You're completely right and my own editorials on the subject do not match your thinking. Good work!*
*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have just finished my June edition. I was very pleased to see Mary Rosenblum's "Celilo," the follow-up story to her "Waterbringer." I hope that Ms. Rosenblum will continue to explore this dry world so that I can add Dan Greely to my list of characters to watch for in your magazine.

At first, the only presence I could recognize at a glance was yours; in your entertaining and thought-provoking editorials, but also in the appearances of that lovable duo, George and Azazel. Now, I await eagerly each new magazine to see which of my friends will occupy it. A glance at the cover might show Janet Kagan; in which case I jump right in to see how things are on Mirabile with Annie and Leo. If I find Mike Resnick listed, then I turn to see if he is treating me to another delightful fable from Kirinyaga. And I am simply in love with Judith Moffett's connected Hefn stories. Each new one has me digging out back issues to refresh my memory!

If you continue to publish series like these, I will never be able to cancel my subscription. How could I bear to miss the next chapter in such wonderful on-going stories? I only hope that you have many more in store for me.

And since I'm writing, I would like you to know that it hasn't gone unnoticed that your work is obscenity-free. Some of us do appreciate your efforts very much; we show it by buying your fiction.

Susan Colflesh
Mt. Pleasant, PA

*Good. We don't want you to cancel your subscription, so we will keep on publishing stories like those you appreciate so much.*
*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov;

I greatly enjoyed your Gilbert & Sullivan pastiche in the June issue. I do wish to point out, though, that the John Brown of the air "John Brown's Body" is not the abolitionist who raided Harper's Ferry in 1859. The tune can be traced to 1856 and is attributed to William Steffe, a South Carolinian composer of camp music. It became especially popular in the Boston area where it was the particular favorite of Col. Webster's 12th Massachusetts. The lyrics (attributed to various parties including T.B. Bishop) were written to poke fun at a soldier then serving in the regiment. The serendipitous similarity of name & the applicability of the first stanza brought it instant national popularity following Brown's hanging on December 2, 1859, and it subsequently became a common marching song for Union troops.

Although you may have little to do with it aside from having your name on the masthead, I wish to compliment you on the consistently high level of writing delivered by the magazine. It is the best single source of short SF available.

Steven C. Radtke
Colchester, CT



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## A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

**We are such things as dreams are made of this February – the dreams of lovers (Valentine's Day), the American dream (President's Day), and the dream of winter's end (Groundhog Day). Though sometimes one can get lost in dreams, (as in Charles de Lint's new fantasy novel) or see them turn into manmade nightmares (as happens in the gameworld of WHEN DREAMS COLLIDE), they have always provided a haven for the homosapien, whether as a place to expand his consciousness or as a refuge to just get away from it all.**

**...and when you see me around, ask me about sequels, a few of which lie in Questar's near future.**

ALSO THIS MONTH

## WHEN DREAMS COLLIDE

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*I'm sorry, but I knew nothing about the early history of "John Brown's Body." I'm glad to have you tell me this.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Your editorial in the June issue ("Untouchable") was a painful reminder that the fight for freedom of speech is an endless one. Each landmark victory for the first amendment is but a temporary respite. The struggle did not end in 1933 when a federal judge granted mailing privileges to Joyce's *Ulysses,* nor did it end in the sixties when Henry Miller's work was finally published legally. There will always be groups and individuals who attempt to impose their views on everyone.

There is no denying that tremendous progress has been made, and revolutionary social changes have occurred. Things are published today that no one would have dared publish forty years ago. However, during the last decade we seem to have regressed considerably, due perhaps to the restrictive mentality that flourished during the Reagan era. In 1957 a San Francisco bookshop beat obscenity charges for selling *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg. In 1990 a Cincinnati museum beat obscenity charges for displaying art by Robert Mapplethorpe. The more things change . . .

Even in a futuristic utopia, filled with Asimovian robots and medical wonders, the timeless battle for freedom of speech will continue.

Timothy M. Walters
Muskogee, OK

*The trouble is that people don't enjoy hearing what they don't want to hear. Therefore they label what they don't want as "obscene," or "perverted" or "unAmerican." All this stuff is what I don't want to hear either, but I just don't listen. Others may want to hear it and they have the right to do so.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Today I received the June 1991 issue of *IAsfm* and promptly dived into your editorial. Having surfaced, refreshed, I went on to the letters column and at the very end read your comment, "Apparently only scallions are handed out, no orchids." Around here (the Queen Charlotte Islands) the wild orchids are protected. So I can't send you any. How about a bouquet of carnations?

I learned to read at an early age, cutting my literary teeth on children's classics such as *Wind in the Willows,* then moving through to fairy tales (ALL the Andrew Lang books, and more) and a generous helping of myth. At the age of ten I segued into fantasy, beginning with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. I was eleven when I picked up *Pebble In The Sky* in the school library. I enjoyed it immensely, and went on to read everything available with "Asimov" on the dustjacket. When I noticed your magazine in the local store, I bought it too, and was introduced to a whole genre, which I have read avidly ever since.

Thank you for being such a good and prolific writer. Thank you for keeping sex and swearing out of



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your novels, and keeping violence to a minimum. And thank you most of all for opening my eyes to the wonderful possibilities in the world around us all.

I would also like to thank you for your science articles for *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, which are informative and entertaining. Actually, this brings in a question. In your April 1991 article "Skimming the Nearest," you class the moon as one of seven satellites.

As I read that, I heard a small voice saying that "a satellite may be a moon, but the moon is not a satellite." I cannot place this snippet and as I've been watching old Star Trek episodes on videotape recently the source may be doubtful. That aside, is the moon a satellite? And if not, why?

Back to that bouquet . . . I have read your magazine off-and-on over the years, and compliment you and your staff on its continuing success and overall high quality. While my satisfaction with individual issues varies, I find I get a great deal more pleasure out of reading it than frustration. And usually the latter reflects my own fussiness and/or personal quirks and often diminishes once I get used to whatever-it-is or mull over the particular item.

I even eventually read a column by Norman Spinrad that I quite enjoyed (February 1990). Persistence does indeed pay off!

In short, by doing what you enjoy and do best you have enriched my life. Thank you!

Yours truly,

Brigid Cumming (Mrs.)
Port Clements, BC
Canada

*The moon was classified as a planet by the ancient Greeks because it moved against the background of the stars. Eventually, when we learned that the planets moved about the sun, the sun itself ceased being considered a planet, and the moon ceased also because it moved about the Earth.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov;

I have just received my first subscription issue of *IAsfm* and am extremely glad I finally did subscribe.

You have always been one of my favorite authors (often my very favorite) but tonight you became one of my favorite all around people. Your editorial on free speech ("Untouchable," June 1991) is a wonderful breath of fresh air in a nation stuffy with flag waving.

Those who would force us all into their version of the "Patriotic American" really have lost touch with what that patriotism was founded on. It was not founded on a "My country, right or wrong" type of patriotism, but a "My country, right or let's fix it" ideal. Otherwise there would not have been a Revolutionary War. Who can fix something that must be supported even when believed wrong?

(The idea behind "America, love it or leave it" could have been a factor in the Civil War. Interesting thought.)

Science Fiction, of course, can lead us to believe in alternatives to the "My planet (species), right or wrong," philosophy. To me, this idea is an even better one, but much harder to grasp.



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But, as I believe a good American ought, I may disagree with what someone says, but I will never suggest it not be said. I can always turn the page.

I did not turn the page, by the way, on your very enjoyable poetry. And while profanity generally doesn't offend me, I do enjoy and appreciate your stories that don't use it. Orchids to you, sir—or would you prefer a perfect rose? With greatest regards,

Bob Hole, Jr.
Concord, CA

*I'm always glad to have someone agree with me so entirely. And I'm particularly glad you liked my "very enjoyable poetry." Personally, I too am fond of my poetry.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

## FROM: A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

### ADVERBS

Gradually they took control.
They would ask each innocent verb
Who came in to the employment office
How she conceived her role
As an employee of Grammar, Inc.

Such questions naturally gave one to think,
Even if one were an adjective,
Living a modestly adjectival life
Out in the suburbs—
To think, that is to say, of what
May actually have been meant by saying
Stop or Go or Do or Dare.

Soon there were adverbs everywhere—
Not just those who'd taken up with verbs
But insidiously clever adverbs
Modifying adjectives!—and even each other!!
The other parts of speech were aghast.
How might they, in plain fairness, resist
These steady adverbial encroachments?
The adjectives suggested, "Let's be more precise."
The verbs agreed: "That would be nice."

And that's how the adverbs were finally,
Though not completely, defeated.

—Tom Disch



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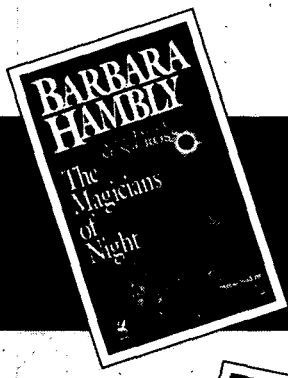
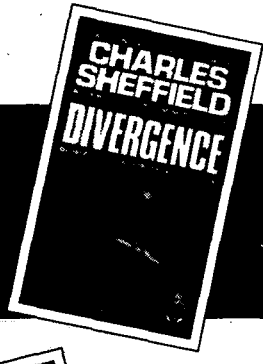
**FEBRUARY**

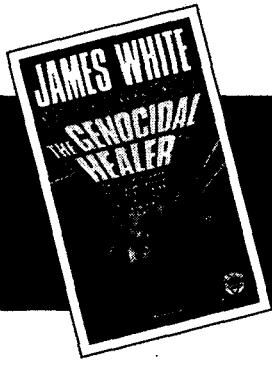
# SORCERY, SCIENCE AND A NEW SECTOR—FROM THE FIRST NAME IN IMAGINATION...




Fledgling wizard Rhion survives his trip across the dreaded Void, only to find himself trapped in Nazi Germany at the outbreak of WWII, in the breathtaking sequel to *The Rainbow Abyss*.




A brilliant new name in hard science-fiction continues the remarkable adventure he began in *Summertide* as humans and aliens join forces to unlock one of the oldest—and most astounding—secrets of the universe!




A powerful drama of mortality and humanity is played out among the myriad nonhuman life forms inhabiting a busy deep-space medical center, in the first new novel in the classic Sector General series in five years!

**#1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy** DEL REY

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art: Steve Cavallo

"Sugar's Blues" is Allen Steele's final tale about the space pros who hang out on Merrit Island at Diamondback Jack's. It completes a trilogy that began with "Free Beer and the William Casey Society" (February 1989) and "The Return of Weird Frank" (December 1991). Mr. Steele's third novel, *Lunar Descent*, was published last October by Ace. His next book, *The Labyrinth of Night*, is an expansion of "Red Planet Blues" (September 1989); it will be released in November.

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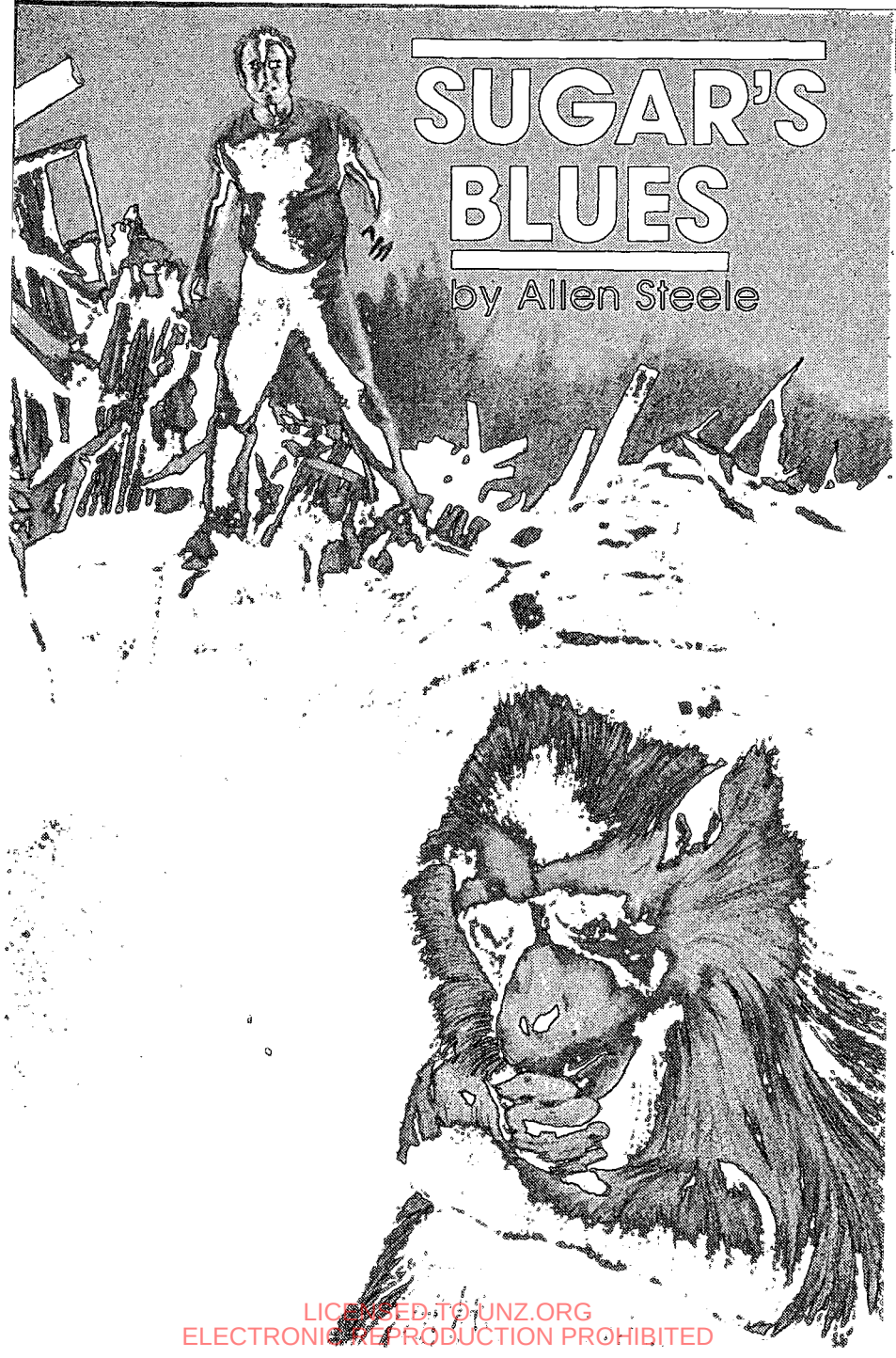


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This is the third story I've written about Diamondback Jack's, and it will also be the last. I've told you about the Free Beer conspiracy and Weird Frank's corpse; these were tales which were first relayed to me by others in that greasy bar on Route Three on Merritt Island, just down the road from the Kennedy Space Center. Now I have one more story to tell.

Diamondback Jack's is no more. It's gone. The joint burned to the ground last week, taking with it the pool table, the jukebox, the booze, and all the pictures of living and dead spacers which had been framed, tacked, and taped on the wall behind the bar. The last and best of the hangouts for the pros of the Cape is gone, leaving behind only an ugly heap of busted glass and blackened rubble. Only the Budweiser sign in the parking lot was unscathed by the fire, but since it was broken long ago by some drunken fool, it's nothing to get nostalgic about; if anything, it's a fitting tombstone to a broken promise.

My broken promise.

When I went back there for the last time yesterday, Jack Baker was clambering through the debris, trying to locate anything salvageable in what had once been his court and kingdom. Maybe he was trying to see if he could find the varnished rattlesnake skin which had been the bar's namesake. I don't know, because I didn't have a chance to talk to him. As soon as my car pulled into the lot, he recognized it; the half-melted whisky bottle shattering on the hood of my Datsun informed me that I wasn't welcome round here no more, if I ever really had been in the first place. I put it in reverse and got out of there in a hurry. The last I saw of Jack was in my rear mirror; he was standing atop the wreckage, silently glaring at me as I sped back down the highway.

Jack is not an inherently violent man, but I know that, if he had been able to find the sawed-off shotgun he kept beneath the counter for the occasional stick-up attempt, he would have gladly pointed it in my direction. He might have even squeezed the trigger and blown me straight to hell. I can't even say that I would have blamed him.

He asked me not to report the story; under the old ground-rules, I usually respected his request. This time, though, I betrayed his trust. In my rush to clear the names of three good men, I forgot our gentlemen's agreement, and it's for that single reason that no one drinks at Diamondback Jack's anymore. Yet, as they always say in the journalism business, the public has a right to know. Memorize that phrase: it's one of the great all-purpose cop-outs of all time. Sorry I ran over your dog, totaled your car, destroyed your career, fucked your sister and gave her a virus, but hey, don't blame *me*, because The Public Has A Right To Know. Says it right here in the First Amendment.

Telling the truth is a dangerous game, but it's the only one I've got. I



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can't rebuild Jack's bar with some words on paper, but I can tell you why, the next time you go down to Merritt Island, there's an empty gravel lot where a bar once stood.

It started with a fistfight.

Offhand, I can think of several good ways to spend a Saturday night on the Cape. Midnight bass-fishing on the Banana River, sitting on the beach in Jetty Park and watching a cargo freighter lift off from the distant pads, enjoying the blue-plate special at Fat Boy's Barbeque in Cocoa Beach . . . or, as in this instance, going down to Diamondback Jack's to hoist a few beers and catch one of the local rockabilly bands Jack Baker used to hire for weekend gigs.

One of the *bad* ways is to receive a bloody nose during a bar brawl, but that's what I get for drinking at Diamondback Jack's.

I didn't witness the beginning of the fight. I was in the john, humming along with the Rude Astronauts' rendition of "Sea Cruise" while relieving myself of the burden of a half-pitcher of Budweiser—as the old saw goes, you don't buy beer, you only rent it—when there was a godawful thump-crash-bang from the front room. My eyes jerked up from my meditations as the music ground to a halt and, amid the cacophony, I heard someone describing someone else as a goddamn sumbitch asshole, or similar words to the effect. I couldn't be certain, because it was drowned out by more demolition work, which sounded only slightly less painful than root canal surgery.

A wise man would have stayed put in the men's room. The Rude Astronauts were not, by definition, the only obnoxious space types out there tonight. Pack a few dozen ornery drunks into a bar, that's one thing; pack a few dozen of the Cape's blue-collar workforce into Diamondback Jack's on a sticky-hot Saturday night in July, and *that's* quite another. Cross one of 'em and there's gonna be trouble: *hey, pal, you gotta nice house? Huh? You gotta nice wife? You got nice kids? You gotta nice cat? Don't fuck with me, or I'll drop a dead satellite on 'em.* But I'm a journalist by trade and lifestyle, which by definition makes me a dummy; reporters go where angels fear to tread. I zipped up my fly and cautiously ventured out front into the barroom, figuring that I would probably see the result of some guy getting too personal with another man's wife or girlfriend on the dance floor.

I came through the door just in time to see Jack Baker sprinting from behind the bar, his trusty Louisville Slugger clenched in his right hand. That was a surprise in itself. Jack's got a gut the size of a medicine ball—have you ever met a skinny bar-owner?—but he moved like Ricky Brock stealing second for the Indians. "Make a hole!" I heard him shout, and as the roomful of regulars veered out of his way, Jack hurled himself



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toward the epicenter of the melee, which was not on the tiny dance-floor in front of the stage where I expected, but toward the left rear end of the barroom.

Five men were on the floor, wrestling with each other in a bath of blood and beer. The three on top looked like regulars—denims, sneakers, cowboy shirts, a couple of Skycorp caps—but the moment I glimpsed the two guys who were pinned down, I knew they didn't belong in this place. Not that I recognized them personally; like the other three, they were complete strangers, but judging by the way they were duded out, I recognized their type.

They were company men. Any company; pick one, they all look alike. Skycorp, Uchu-Hiko, or Galileo, if you choose the privates, or maybe NASA, FBI, CIA, NSA, NSC, FAA, FDA, DEA, IRS, or any of the rest of the alphabet soup one normally associates with the government bureaucracy which haunts the Cape. However, Diamondback Jack's was one of the few places which was tacitly *verboten* to suits. If you're not a working-class spacer, if you're someone who does nothing more at the Kennedy Space Center than carry around a clipboard and a nametag, you should have better sense than to walk into this joint. These guys—with their off-the-rack sport coats, nylon golf shirts, flat-top haircuts, and matching used-car-dealer mustaches—stuck out in a dive like Jack's. Someone should tell these bozos that just putting on a pair of Levis and Monkey Ward topsiders doesn't do the trick; even New York City subway cops have a better sense of camouflage. These yahoos had narc written all over them; I wondered how they got through the door in the first place.

Jack was already pushing back one of the regulars with his baseball bat; the other two were backing off, suddenly mindful of the mess they had created. The two suits on the bottom were beginning to pick themselves up off the floor; one of them, a guy with thinning blond hair, had a large rip down the back of his plaid sport coat and one eye which was half closed from a bruise he had taken from a punch. He looked as if he was in bad shape; I instinctively went forward to give the guy a hand off the floor. People are people, right?

"Hey, hey . . ." I said as I knelt down to grab the suit from under his armpits, intending to help him to his feet. "Don't . . . let's take a look at . . ."

"Fuck you," he snarled. And then the jerk, still sitting on his ass, whipped around with his right fist and nailed me square in the nose.

So much for my application to the Good Samaritan Hall of Fame.

Things became a bit confused for awhile after that, and I didn't catch everything that happened. My getting decked touched off a free-for-all of punching and harsh language. Not that anyone was standing up for



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me, because I didn't mean shit to most people in the bar; it's only that the only other thing that Florida bar-crawlers enjoy more on a humid summer night than drinking, dancing, or looking to get laid is fighting. From my dazed perspective, it resembled a feeding fenzy in the water hazard of a miniature golf course, right after you toss some popcorn into the midst of a bunch of bored catfish. Fight? Good! Let's *punch* someone!

Jack gave up on the baseball bat and grabbed the fire extinguisher instead; a few loud shots of carbon dioxide at the ceiling above the crowd cleared the bar in a hurry. He didn't have to go to that extreme, though; anyone with any sense was getting the hell out of there. The Rude Astronauts had already packed up their instruments and sound equipment and had quietly loaded their gear into their van as fast as possible; they were hired to play, not brawl, and Jack didn't have chicken-wire erected in front of his stage. In the main ring, the suits had long since lost; they were thrown out the door, and although a couple of members of the original fight went out into the parking lot to discuss proper public etiquette with them, I do not believe Miss Manners would have approved of their form of instruction.

Meanwhile, out in the bleacher-seats of hell, I was slumped in one of the booths—half-stunned, holding a wad of paper napkins against my snoot, tasting blood running down the back of my mouth. Funny thing about a nosebleed: it's more embarrassing than painful. I've got a glass nose, and I'm no stranger to having my face hit. All those teenage years of getting beat up in the schoolyard for being a smartass instead of a jock taught me a few things about controlling nosebleeds, so previous experience told me that all I had to do was sit still, lean my head back, keep something absorbant pressed against my face and breathe through my mouth. It didn't do anything for all the blood on my shirt, but at least it would save me from getting hosed by Jack's fire extinguisher.

The next time I remembered anything clearly, it was when things were calm again. The mob had been cleared from the bar, the place was empty, and somebody had placed a Budweiser tallneck on the table in front of me.

"Here," said a voice. "Rinse your mouth out with this."

As I looked up, my benefactor settled in the seat on the other side of the booth. It was one of the guys who had originally been in the brawl, although you could barely tell it; he didn't have a mark on him except for some beer splattered across the front of his cowboy shirt. Not surprising; he was a big guy with a linebacker's build, the type of person who doesn't start fights but always finishes them.

He also looked a bit old to be mixed up in this sort of shit: mid-fifties, with crow's-feet around his alert blue eyes, close-cropped gray hair, country-style long sideburns framing a square jaw. A pro. An old-time spacer. Hang around the Cape long enough and you can always tell the type.



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Yet he also looked vaguely familiar. . . .

Fuck it. "Thanks," I said as I picked up the bottle, took a long drink and swirled beer around inside my mouth. I glanced around; Jack was looking the other way for the moment, so I spit it out onto the bloody, booze-drenched floor. The place was a mess already, and it got the clotted-blood taste out of my mouth. The guy on the other side of the table smiled, but didn't make a federal case out of my slobbish behavior. He had seen worse.

"Just wanted to tell you I'm sorry that you got hurt," he said. His voice had a soft, southern-gentleman's lilt to it: Colonel Mississippi Cornpone crossed with Deke Slayton. "I know it wasn't your fight and that you were trying to break things up."

He shrugged, his face becoming more serious. "Wasn't *my* fight either . . . at least I didn't start it. I'm just sorry that you had to get in the way."

I was about to reply when there was the screech of car tires peeling out of the parking lot. A few seconds later, the door banged open and two men entered from the lot. I immediately recognized them as the two other regulars who had been in the fight. One of them glanced our way. "They're outta here, Sugar," he said.

At first, I thought there was a woman sitting behind us, but the adjacent booth was vacant. "Sugar" isn't the sort of nickname one normally associates with a fellow who looks tough enough to pound nails with his fists, but my friend didn't seem to mind. "Okay, Mike," he said, solemnly nodding his head. "I think we've seen the last of 'em for awhile. You and Doug go grab yourselves a cold one and take it easy."

Jack already had a couple of tallnecks waiting for them on the bar; it was a funny way for Baker to be treating guys who had just wrecked his place, chased out his customers and his band, and caused him to close down early on a Saturday night. But instead of complaining, he quietly grabbed a broom and dustpan and went to work sweeping up the debris while the two men picked up their beers.

Pretty weird shit, all things considered. If the suits weren't on their way to the county hospital emergency room, then they were headed straight for the Merritt Island cop shop. Yet if either one of Sugar's friends gave a damn, they didn't show it. There's a certain untouchable look about men who've just beaten the crap out of someone who deserved it, but Mike and Doug weren't northern Florida yee-haw rednecks looking for a brawl. The way they carried themselves told me that they, like Sugar, were pros. . . .

*Sugar.*

There was something familiar about the nickname, matched with that face, which tickled the back of my mind. My head was stuffed with clotted



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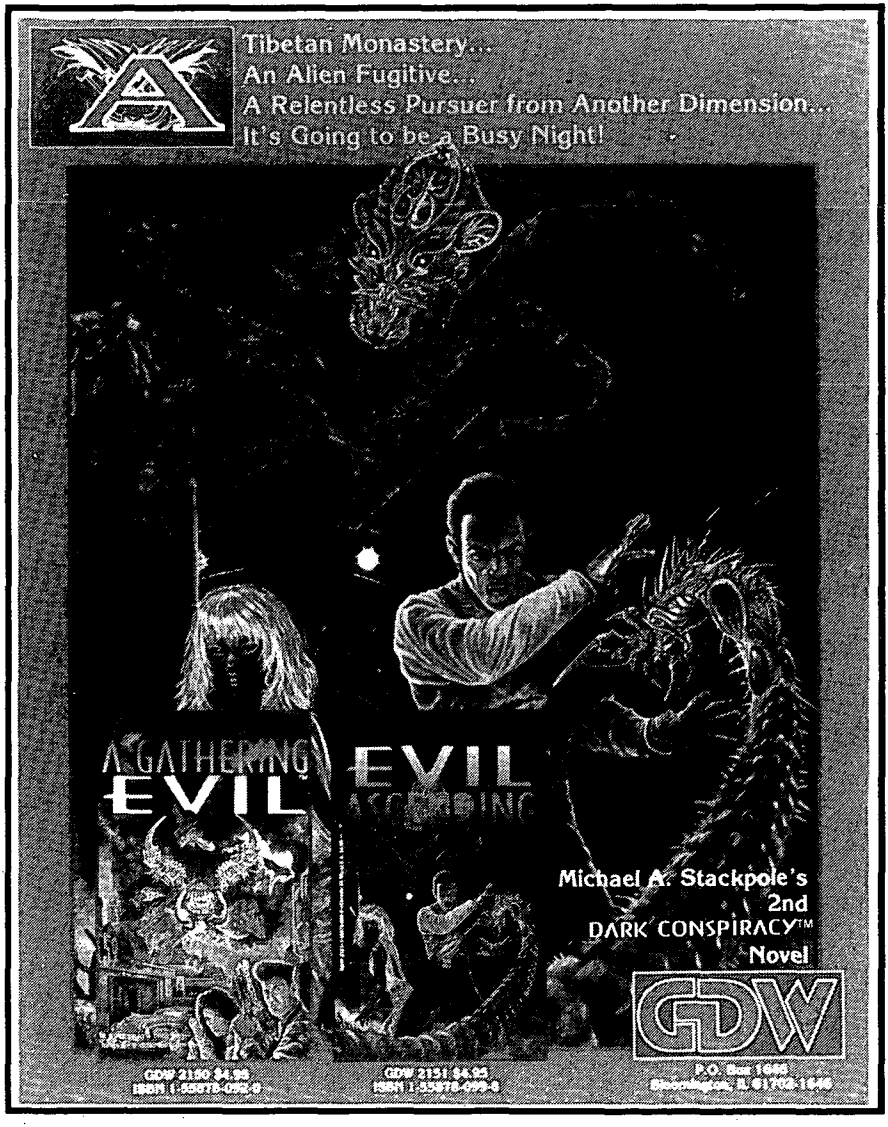
# EVIL ASCENDING

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blood; I couldn't think straight. "So what was this all about, anyway?" I asked, and Sugar looked back toward me. "I mean, I got into the show late, so why did you get into a fight with these guys?"

Sugar shrugged off-handedly. "Well, y'know how it is. We just came over to have a couple of beers and they were on our case again, doing the usual surveillance routine. They kept watching us and Doug got pissed, so he went over to get them to leave and they . . ."

*"Shut up!"*

The shout came from Jack. He was kneeling on the floor next to the broken juke-box, gathering the scratched CDs which had been thrown from its shattered case. He stared at Sugar with anger in his eyes; Sugar instantly went quiet.

"Al's a regular here," Baker went on, more quietly now, "but he's not a pro. He's a reporter." He glanced at me, sour annoyance in his face. "I let him in because he doesn't talk too much . . . but he's still with the press, so watch your mouth, okay? He's not one of us."

Not One Of Us. Christ. I sighed, wiping my nose again and dropping the paper wad on the table. My old outsider-insider status with Diamondback Jack's had once again returned to haunt me.

Outsider, because I was a stringer for the *Times*, and journalists are traditionally unwelcome among the pros at the Cape. Conventional wisdom says, since we ask dumb questions at press conferences and never get the facts straight, stick our noses (bloody or otherwise) into places where they don't belong, always blab secrets better left untold, and are generally pains in everyone's collective ass, we are untrustworthy as a collective whole. Journalists rank with sand fleas at the Cape; barely tolerated, never welcome. Insider, because I was a regular at Diamondback Jack's. I normally went there to drink, not to play reporter. My notebook and recorders stayed in the car where they belonged; if someone told me a story, it was with everyone's explicit permission . . . and under no circumstances would it appear in my paper (okay, so I cheated a little by writing the stories I heard as thinly disguised fiction). Most of the time, the gossip and rumors never left the walls of the bar.

It was a hard-won status, being the token blabbermouth in Good Old Boy territory; for this reason alone, though, my presence was tolerated. Jack Baker was one of the very few people who was aware of my profession, and it was only because I had demonstrated the ability to keep secrets that I was allowed in his bar in the first place. I was always careful never to cross the line.

This time, though, it looked as if I had stepped over it. Mike and Doug put down their beers and were studying me with expressions which suggested that I was the next person to make a visit to the parking lot. For a few moments I wondered if Jack Baker would be tacking my hide



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to the wall alongside that of the rattlesnake he had allegedly killed during a fishing trip in the Everglades. There was—as purveyors of purple prose are permanently predestined to pontificate—a pregnant silence, and I thought I was going to have a baby.

"Reporter. Well now. . . ." Sugar folded his hands together on the tabletop and gazed at me with speculative amusement. "You're not trying to wrangle a story out of this, now are you?"

I quickly shook my head and started to say that it had only been a curious question, but Sugar nodded his head. "No," he continued, "I don't think so. But if ol' Jack here says you can be trusted, then I'll believe you."

He looked toward his companions, who had eased off a little but still hadn't relaxed their guard. "In fact, perhaps we *should* take our case to the press. They keep trying to pick a fight with us, so maybe it's time we fought back. What do you say, gentlemen?"

Doug looked suspicious, but he slowly nodded his head. "I dunno," Mike murmured. "They're pissed at us enough already. If we go spilling our guts . . ."

"What are they going to do that they haven't done already?" Sugar spread open his hands. "We're grounded, we're broke, we're unemployed, our names are dirt in the industry. They call us on the phone in the middle of the night, they follow our wives and kids all the time . . . hell, we can't even step out for a beer without having a couple of them tagging along. Maybe we should have gone public eleven months ago." He gestured toward me. "I don't know this guy, but he's press, and he's already seen part of it. Perhaps we should just go ahead and come clean. How can it get much worse than it is already?"

I already didn't like the sound of this. Contrary to popular myth, most journalists don't go looking for trouble; it finds them, whether they invite it or not. Many years ago, when I had been a staff writer on a muckraking weekly paper, I had done a story about a junkyard which was using its lot as an illegal hazardous-waste disposal site, taking toxic chemicals from local manufacturers and burying them in the back acre. Nearby community residents had tipped me off, and the story which I wrote caused the state's environmental agency to investigate and finally shut the place down. The junkyard owner was pissed off at me; for several weeks, thugs made frequent visits to the newspaper office in search of yours truly, until the circuit court passed verdict on the junkyard and the chap in charge was sent off to prison. Even then, it had been several months before I stopped checking over my shoulder whenever I walked down the street.

This was beginning to look like a replay of that incident. I started



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measuring the distance to the door. Then the big guy stuck out his hand. "Name's Ted Saltzman," he said. "My friends call me Sugar."

*Sugar Saltzman.* All at once, the connection became clear. I felt stupid for having missed it before.

Yes, I had heard of him. Everyone at the Cape had heard of Sugar Saltzman. And at the moment I finally linked the face to the name. I knew I wasn't going to leave the bar until I had heard his story.

If you haven't heard of Sugar Saltzman, you don't read newspapers or watch TV. He was not only a legend in the space industry, but one of very few spacers whose name ever became known outside the insular community of the Cape. He was one of the very best of the old-school astronauts, and his rise to fame was matched in velocity only by his descent into infamy.

Before Saltzman joined NASA, he had been an Air Force fighter-pilot. When he was still in his twenties, he had flown F-117's out of Saudi Arabia for sorties over Baghdad during Gulf War I. Not long after the war, he quit the USAF to enlist in the NASA astronaut corps. He flew numerous orbital missions on the second-generation shuttles before NASA was reorganized into a regulatory agency and space industrialization was privatized. He was Skycorp's first-draft pick among the old NASA shuttle jockeys; the story goes that Rock Chapman himself had recruited Saltzman, on the basis of a brief exchange the two old flyboys had at a burger joint on Route A1A. *Why do they call you Sugar?* Rock had asked, and Sugar had replied, *Because everything I do comes out sweet.*

Indeed, Sugar Saltzman was an ace among aces and a pro among pros, a genuine hot-shit shuttle jockey; even the best of old-guard NASA astronauts from the last century couldn't match his record. While working for Skycorp, he amassed more flight-hours than any other pilot in history, sometimes under conditions which pushed the edges of the proverbial envelope. When his shuttle lost power to its APUs just prior to re-entry, he suited-up, went EVA, and went back to the aft section to fix a shorted-out conduit in the aft engine section, relying on talk-through from the ground and his own memory of the complex wiring system; another pilot might have curled into a rescue ball and waited for someone else to save his ass, but Saltzman had taken care of the situation himself, and brought his vessel and crew safely home. And when Phoenix Station had suffered an electrical fire and lost life-support, giving its crew less than two days of oxygen before they asphyxiated, Sugar had taken a rescue team into low-orbit even as a killer hurricane was bearing down on the Cape from the Bahamas.



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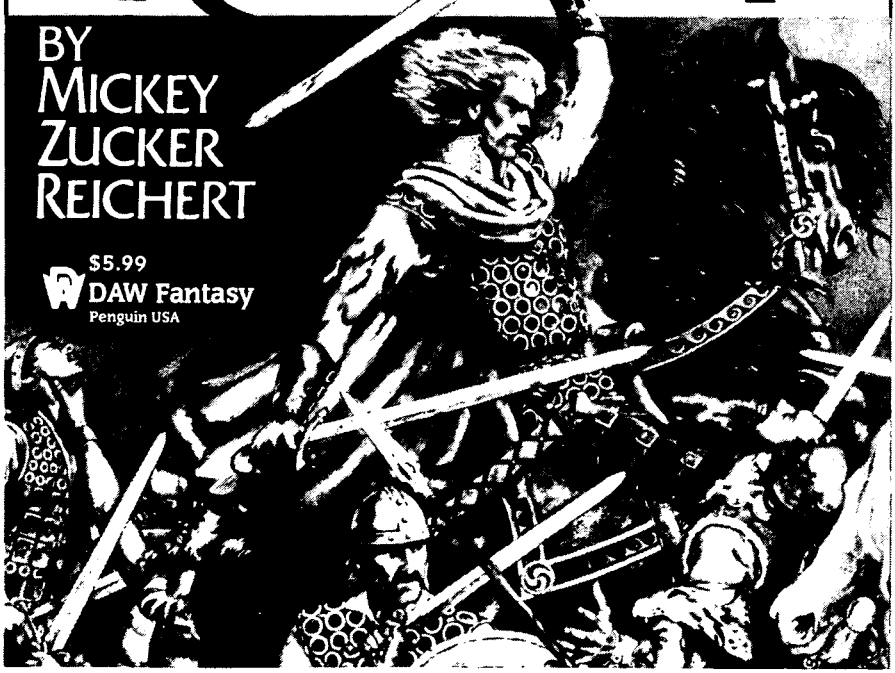

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If there was any pilot who typified the mysterious, grace-under-pressure quality which Tom Wolfe had once called "the right stuff," it was Sugar Saltzman. Skycorp had been only too happy to capitalize on his local fame; they needed a twenty-first-century hero to match the Scott Crossfields and Chuck Yeagers of the past, if only to enhance their corporate self-image. The public was tired of actors and politicians and self-made celebrities; they wanted someone they could genuinely admire, that larger-than-life person whom every man could emulate. Sugar Saltzman fit the bill, and Skycorp was only too willing to oblige. Since Saltzman regularly flew one particular shuttle—then called the *John Young*, itself named after one of NASA's legendary astronauts—Skycorp rechristened it, allowing Sugar to choose the new name. The pilot picked the name of an old RAF Lancaster which had flown bombing missions over Germany during World War II; an artist had repainted the Lanc's topless Vargas girl on the shuttle's forward port fuselage, along with the shared name of the two craft. The *John Young* thereby became known as *Sugar's Blues*.

Sugar did talk-shows, interviews, modeled T-shirts and did cola commercials and all the rest, but he never stopped flying; he remained on Skycorp's active-duty roster and didn't sell out to become a full-time celebrity. For the next few years, both the shuttle and its commander were legends in their own time. Skycorp allowed him to select his own regular crew; his picks were Mike Green as his co-pilot and Doug McPherson as his cargo specialist, both of whom were already seasoned shuttle honchos. The heavy-breathing magazine writers who profiled Skycorp's star team inevitably referred to them as the "Blues Brothers."

For a brief time, they were the ace kids on the block. Nobody could touch 'em, either for real flying skill or for hubris. But it didn't last for very long.

Shortly after Saltzman's twenty-fourth orbital mission, the pilot and his crewmates were accused of being "habitual drug offenders" . . . junkies, once you get away from mediaspeak.

When the hammer came down, I wasn't around to be part of the public trashing. The *Times* had dispatched me to Sydney to cover an international space-tech conference, so I wasn't in town when Sugar Saltzman and his crew were busted. I'm glad I wasn't involved; it was an ugly situation.

In short, Saltzman, Green, and McPherson had been at the Cape for a pre-flight mission briefing when a security officer from NASA's Law Enforcement Division requested that they open their ready-room lockers for what seemed to be a routine inspection. It happened all the time—NASA had firm rules against alcohol being allowed within KSC,



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and everyone was used to spot-checks—so the Blues Brothers had complied with the request—yet when the lockers were searched, each man was found to be in possession of various drugs. A shaving kit in Saltzman's locker contained a quarter-ounce of marijuana and a small vial of cocaine, Green's jumpsuit pocket held a few joints, and a tinfoil packet concealed in one of McPherson's boots contained a couple of grams of hashish, plus a small pipe which had been recently smoked.

All three men claimed innocence, and even the NASA cop who had made the bust later claimed to be skeptical despite the hard evidence; he had been following-up an anonymous tip which had been posted in his computer's e-mail, and he had only made the search because of departmental policy to investigate all such allegations. Yet, within a few hours of the bust, an over-eager NASA press spokesman went public with the charges against the men, and the unskeptical space-beat reporters at the Cape eagerly aped the official line; before the end of the day, the Blues Brothers were being called the Space Junkies.

The crew of *Sugar's Blues* immediately protested that they had been framed; they volunteered for urine and hair-root testing, but if they had hoped that the lab analyses would confirm their innocence, they were wrong. All three tests came back positive, showing that the spacers had been using pot, coke, and hash for a period of at least several months.

By the time I got back from my Australian junket, it was all over; NASA had permanently grounded Sugar Saltzman and his mates, and Skycorp had almost instantly fired them. Although the court later threw out the subsequent federal lawsuit because of legal technicalities, their careers were finished. The editorialists and media commentators vented their usual bathos, pathos, phony shock, and rehearsed outrage; meanwhile, the public suffered its own private heartbreak before it quickly forgot the whole thing.

For their own part, Sugar and his men refused to speak to the press. They went to ground, rarely seen around the Cape. As usual, the story was a ten-day sensation. By the time Skycorp shame-facedly re-rechristened *Sugar's Blues* as the *John Young*—its voluptuous Vargas girl painted over, never to be seen on the flight-line again—Saltzman, Green, and McPherson had quickly faded from the public mindset. Bunny Chaykin-Schnienkovitch had once again flashed her boobs on TV; in the face of such monumental artistic achievement, who could remember what's-their-names, the pothead astronauts?

And now, here they were. Up from the underground and ready to talk.

Jack cocked a finger at me, motioning for me to follow him into the tiny office behind the bar. Once I was back there, he half-closed the door. "Look, Al . . ." he began.



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"Look, I swear it wasn't my idea," I said before he could go on. "But if they've got something on their minds that they want to tell me . . ."

"Okay, okay, I understand. It's your job and all that." He thrust a finger in my face. "But you understand me. *Nothing* about my place gets into anything you write. You got me straight on that? I've let you get away with it twice before because nobody around here reads that rag you moonlight for . . ."

"I'll let my editor know that. He'll be so touched. . . ."

". . . but this time I really *mean* it. You guys haven't been within a hundred miles of here, I swear to God, 'cause if you *do* . . ."

"Okay, okay. Ease down." I put up my hands defensively. "I promise you, if I write a story, I won't mention where it came from. I promise."

Baker stared me straight in the eye, then slowly nodded his head. I could understand that he wasn't crazy about having his bar used as a confessional, but I intuitively realized that there was much more to it than that. Jack knew something—bartenders run second-place only to God for knowing everything, because if you don't do church you probably speak to your bartender instead—and it frightened him so much that he didn't want to have anything to do with it. The only reason why he was going along with this was because of his obvious respect for Sugar Saltzman.

And Jack wasn't the only person who was being paranoid. Although Doug volunteered to be interviewed with Sugar, Mike opted to sit outside the bar and watch for a possible return of the suits. After I went out to my car to fetch my notebook and recorder, Jack locked the doors and switched off most of the lights, signaling that Diamondback Jack's was closed for the night. He placed two pitchers of beer in front of us, then retired to the back office, allegedly to balance the books.

I switched on my recorder and opened my notebook as Sugar poured a beer for me. "The morning we made our last flight on the *Blues* . . ." he began.

"Let's get it straight for the man, Cap," Doug interrupted, pushing forward his own beer mug. "It was last April 12."

"April 12, 2023. Like I could forget." Sugar pushed the topped-off mug in front of me and reached for his former co-pilot's glass. I noted that he left his own mug dry. "Anyway, the *Blues* was already on the pad, because we had a milk run to Olympus Station scheduled the day after tomorrow. Mission 24 for us, and I didn't think it was going to be much different, except that after Mission 25, I was half-planning to tender my resignation to the company."

This surprised me. "You were about to retire anyway?" I asked, and Sugar sagely nodded his head. "Was it because of a medical problem or . . . ?"



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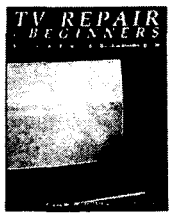


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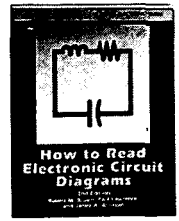


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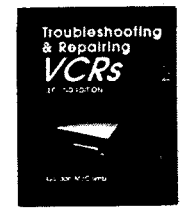


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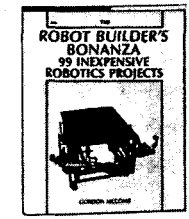


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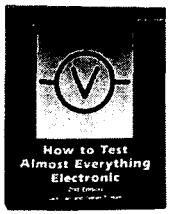


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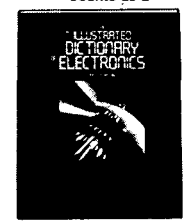


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Sugar chuckled. "Yeah, you can say that, if you want to call getting old a medical problem. Hell, I'm pushing sixty. Counting the missions I did for NASA before I joined Skycorp, I would have gone up thirty times. That's enough. All I wanted to do was hand over the wheel to Sir Douglas here, buy me an old crop-duster or something, and spend my golden years farting around Cocoa Beach."

He laughed again, but it sounded forced this time. "That was the plan, at any rate. But then, two days before we were supposed to go up, I get a call at three in the morning from Gene Antonio, the chief of Skycorp's astronaut office, telling me there's been a fire."

"A fire up there," McPherson added, cocking his thumb toward the ceiling. "Y'know what he means?"

I knew. In this context, "fire" was a code-word for a life-threatening emergency in orbit. NASA, Skycorp, and the other space companies started using it groundside to mask serious situations, in order to confuse the press, who might overhear cellular phone conversations. Just such a thing had happened during the Phoenix Station accident, when half of the Cape press corps learned that there was trouble in low-orbit because of an uncoded conversation between two NASA techs on their car-phones. Saying that's there been a garbage can fire is much more innocuous than saying that the life-support system of a spacecraft has gone kaput and that a rescue mission is necessary.

Green and McPherson were also awakened by the astronaut chief, but it wasn't until a half-hour later, when the Blues Brothers were convened in the green room of Skycorp's Operations and Checkout building, that they learned the exact nature of the emergency. Attending the meeting were NASA flight director Joe Marx, Skycorp astronaut chief Eugene Antonio, and NASA press liaison Margaret Jacobi; also present, to their surprise, was a person named Edward Collier, who was introduced as being a corporate rep from a pharmaceutical firm called Space BioTech, itself a subsidiary of a much larger multinational biotech company, Spectrum-Mellencamp Inc.

"We got the skinny while we were having our coffee and doughnuts," Sugar said. "Spectrum-Mellencamp owned a small spacelab in low-equatorial orbit, about three hundred miles up, called Bios One. They were operating it as a microgravity R&D facility to whip up stuff like fertilizers, human-growth hormones, junk like that. Collier told us that, for the past year or so, Space BioTech had been using it to develop a new pharmaceutical."

"That sounds rather vague."

"Yeah, it was," McPherson said, "and he was real elusive about it. I tried to ask him exactly what he meant, but he said that he couldn't tell



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us any more because of the firm's proprietary interests." He sipped his beer. "That's when I first got a bad feeling about the whole deal."

"Yeah," Sugar agreed. "So did I, but there was too much else going on, so we didn't push him on it. Since there were three lives on the line, I didn't feel like we needed to know everything."

At 0100 A.M., an unmanned orbital transfer vehicle, which had been launched by a Big Dummy from the Cape the previous evening, had attempted to dock in the garage module of Bios One. A routine bi-weekly resupply mission, but in the last few seconds of the maneuver, something had gone seriously wrong; the OTV's main engine had misfired while the spacecraft was under remote-control from Bios One. The exact cause of the misfire was still unknown, although NASA trouble-shooters suspected human error by the controller on the little space station. Whatever the reason, the OTV had rammed the garage. The crash had punctured the cargo craft's LOX tank, and the vehicle had exploded.

Details were fuzzy after that. Debris from the explosion had punctured the hull of the spacelab's command/lab module, one of the station's two major cylinders. Ned Hersh, Bios One's manager, who had been on duty in the command module at the time of the accident, had managed to transmit a Mayday before radio contact was lost; he said that there was a blowout in Module One, but no other information was relayed before the downlink was severed at the source. If the garage module was destroyed and Module One was crippled, then it was assumed that communications had been lost when the nearby telemetry mast, mounted on the portside solar wing, was totaled by the explosion.

In fact, everything else was based upon assumption. If there *were* any survivors, they had to be in Module Two, the habitation cylinder mounted above Module One. And if the portside solar wing had also been damaged, then 50 percent of the spacelab's power supply was nullified; given the proximity of the outboard oxygen tanks to the garage, it could also be assumed that much of Bios One's life-support capability had also been nixed.

There was one further problem. According to ground tracking by the USAF Space Command in Colorado Springs, Bios One's orbit had radically shifted. It looked like the force of the explosion had managed to nudge the spacelab out of its orbit; since there was an apparent loss of control from the station itself, Bios One's orbit was decaying, and it was being gradually hauled down the gravity well. Within a week, at the very most, the space station would begin to enter Earth's upper atmosphere, where it would be destroyed.

Phoenix Station, the major NASA space station, which was also in equatorial orbit, had been notified of the emergency, but the crew couldn't do anything about it; its present position was on the other side



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of Earth, and they didn't have the capability to effect a long-range rescue mission since their transorbit shuttle, unluckily enough, was presently down for repairs. Mir 3, the Soviet space station, was in an entirely different orbit and inclination, all but completely out of reach; Olympus Station, Skycorp's powersat construction station, was located in geosynchronous orbit almost twenty-two thousand miles away, and therefore useless for something like this.

But *Von Braun*-class shuttles were designed for quick-turnaround and launch, and since weather patterns around the Cape were forecast to remain stable for the next twelve-to-twenty-four hours, it was entirely possible that a rescue mission could be launched from the ground. "*Sugar's Blues* was already on the pad, ready to go," Sugar went on. "In fact, NASA had already called for fueling and a fast-cycle launch by the time Antonio had given us the call."

I shook my head. "I don't understand. If they were asking you to perform a rescue operation . . . ?"

"Ain't no *asking* about it," Sugar interrupted. "There's this sub-paragraph in the federal regs, the SOS clause, which says that if an American-registered manned spacecraft is in trouble while in orbit, then NASA can use right of eminent domain to draft whatever resources are available to rescue the crewmembers. So we were drafted from the git-go."

"Not that we were about to refuse," Doug said. "I mean, even if those guys were employed by someone else and had dumbfucked something easy like an OTV rendezvous, they were still spacers. You help out whenever you can. No one had to wave the rule-book at us." He shrugged. "Besides, we were the Blues Brothers. Skycorp's all-star team, the danger boys. You think we're going to back down from something like this? I *lived* for this kind of action."

"At first sight, it looked pretty much like a cut-and-dried mission," Sugar said. "We would launch at eighteen-hundred hours, ascend to orbit, and link-up with Bios One. We'd find the survivors if there were any, load 'em into the shuttle and bring 'em home. It was all pretty much by the book. No problem."

He picked up the pitcher, pushed his neglected mug beneath it, and began to pour himself a drink. "Then this Collier character opens his pie-hole. 'No no no,' he says. 'Spectrum-Mellencamp has a considerable dollar investment in Bios One. Space BioTech has an important logistics module linked to it, we can't just rescue the crew and let everything else burn up.' Yackety-yack and don't talk back. As it turns out, he wants us to uncouple the log-mod on the station, haul it into *Blue*'s cargo bay, and bring it home with us."

"The same logistics module which is manufacturing something he wouldn't tell us about," McPherson said. "The way he came across made



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it sound as if he really didn't give a shit for the poor bastards on his station. He wanted that fucking module brought back, first and foremost."

Sugar grimaced at the memory. "I told the NASA guys that he had to be pulling my dick. I mean, making rendezvous with a station in a decaying orbit is one thing, performing a rescue operation is quite another. Okay, we can swing that. But disengaging a two-ton logistics module from the superstructure, hauling it into the *Blues*'s cargo bay with the RWS arm, and bringing it back home . . . I mean, didn't they have their priorities a little bit confused here?"

He topped off his beer and put the pitcher down, yet he didn't pick up the mug. "But, no, they sided with Collier. Retrieving the log-mod was just as essential as rescuing the personnel. No compromise. Even Gene, who usually had more sense than that since he was once a pilot, went along with it."

"Mike and I pitched a bitch," McPherson said. "Y'know, we knew what was ahead of us. We make it sound easy, but handling a fire is really a bitch, especially when your target is incommunicado and in a decaying orbit, and you've got to land heavy. All that seemed to fly right over Collier's head, though. He seemed to think we were truck drivers or something. Pick up some stuff at Point A, bring it back to Point B . . . no goddamn idea what he was talking about."

"Did you accept the mission then?" I asked.

They simultaneously nodded their heads. "Yeah, we accepted," Sugar said. "Like we had a choice?" Then he picked up his beer and, tipping it toward me, gave me a sly wink. "But I still knew that, given a choice between rescuing the survivors and bringing home their precious log-mod, there was only one way I'd go."

I stopped the recorder for a few minutes while Doug visited the john; meanwhile, Sugar stepped outside for a second to ask Mike if he had seen anything. The car which the two suits had driven away from Diamondback Jack's had not returned, but Mike didn't want to come back inside. I was holding the door open while Sugar spoke to his former co-pilot; it was difficult to tell in the darkness, but it looked as if Green had Jack's baseball bat with him.

"The launch and orbital insertion was right by the numbers," Sugar went on, once we had all returned to the booth. "Our communications was a closed-channel downlink with Huntsville SOC, which in turn had us patched in with KSC. Since we were using a military frequency, no one could eavesdrop on us. A press blackout was in force, but people knew something was going on. . . ."



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"I remember," I said. "I was at the press center when they finally told us about the fire."

Sugar nodded his head. "Yeah, and you probably bought the party line, didn't you?" I winced and started to say something, but he just smiled. "No hard feelings, pal. At the time, I didn't want you to know the truth either."

The official explanation for the early launch of *Sugar's Blues* had been that a unidentified manned spacecraft was having unspecified problems and that the shuttle had been launched to give assistance, but the NASA public affairs office had refused to release any details. Although no one outside Skycorp's Space Operations Center in Huntsville and Firing Room Two at the Cape knew what was going on in Earth orbit, the crew of *Sugar's Blues* were only too aware of the extent of the crisis. Within an hour of their launch from Pad Five-B, the shuttle rendezvoused with Bios One.

As they made the primary approach, they could see that the spacelab was a wreck. The garage module was almost completely demolished, blown apart from the inside by the collision of the OTV. The port solar wing had been completely sheered away by the explosion, and there were long rents in the gold mylar which covered the outer fuselage of the adjacent command/laboratory module. However, the station's navigational lights were still shining, indicating that Bios One had not lost all of its internal power, and Module Two looked reasonably intact. Two elongated lateral nodes connected the habitat modules; attached to Node One, just above the habitation module, was the beer-can shaped Space BioTech logistics module, apparently unscratched.

McPherson focused a 35 mm camera through the dorsal observation window and shot a full disk of film while the two pilots gently manuevered *Sugar's Blues* toward the crippled station. The main docking collar, located at the bottom of Node One next to the garage, was obstructed by wreckage, but once they had wrenched open the cargo bay doors, Sugar and Mike managed to hard-dock with the undamaged auxiliary docking adapter, located on top of Node Two directly across from the logistics module. Through the flight deck windows, they could partly see what lay beyond the cupola windows at the end of Module Two; although the windows were dimly illuminated by a weak amber glow from within, they could see no apparent motion. The windows of Module One's cupola were completely dark. Altogether, Bios One appeared lifeless.

"We couldn't raise anyone on the comlink, but that wasn't surprising, since the communications center was located in Module One," Sugar said. "I decided to go down and take a look-see. The airlock indicator told me that there was pressure within the node, but I didn't want to take



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any chances with a short-out in the sensor circuits, so I suited-up before I went into the airlock."

"Mike stayed on the flight deck," McPherson said, "while I went back to the mid-deck to power-up the RWS and get ready to bring the log-mod aboard." He smiled a little as he picked up his beer. "The boss here, as always, wanted to hog all the glory."

"Yeah," Sugar replied, "like I really had to arm-wrestle you for the privilege." Doug grinned, but there seemed to be little humor in his expression. "Anyway, so there I went . . . through the airlock and down the access tunnel 'til I reached the Module Two hatch. The pressure light was green, so I undogged it and pushed myself inside."

Up until now his delivery had been methodical and concise, an almost monotonous just-the-facts-mister retelling of the key points of the mission. Now Sugar's voice dropped slightly as he clasped his hands together and gazed down at them.

"It was *so* weird," he murmured. "Remember what it was like when you were a kid and you snuck into some old house that everyone said was haunted? It was like that. Only the emergency lights were on, so everything was colored red. Nothing and nobody was moving. The galley table was folded down and there was a food-tray attached to it, but nobody was sitting there eating. Through my helmet, though, I could hear someone talking. . . ."

"The monkeys," McPherson prodded. "Tell him about the monkeys."

Saltzman quickly nodded his head. "Yeah, right. The monkeys." He took a deep breath, still staring at his hands. "Next to the hatch there were two little cages in the wall, and in each one a Rhesus monkey was floating around. Now, y'know, caged animals usually go berserk when someone gets near 'em, but these little guys hardly noticed me, even when the light from my helmet lamp touched 'em. At first I couldn't figure it out . . . they were alive, because I could see them move and there was steam coming from their noses. . . ."

"It was cold in the station?" I asked.

"Yeah, it was cold," Sugar said impatiently. "The heat was turned down. It was cold. . . ." He paused to collect his thoughts again. "Anyway, so I look in and I see that each of the monkeys has their own little computer terminal in there. Little screen, big oversized keys, a little food-pellet dispenser rigged up next to the computer. Typical stimulus-response experiment . . . whenever they gave some right answer, another pellet would be shot down the tube to the monkey. But since the tube was transparent, I could see it was empty."

He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "I peer into the cages, and I can see that the monkeys are tapping the same keys over and over again, and the same equation keeps appearing on the screens. Two plus two



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minus one equals three . . . two plus two minus one equals three . . . same thing, over and over. And each time that happens, I saw a blue light appear on the screens and I could hear a little beep from the computers, and the food slots would open but nothing would come out. But the monkeys didn't care. They weren't even *looking* at the tubes. They were completely transfixed by the screens. All response, no stimulus."

He let out his breath. "No one had cleaned their cages for awhile, so the poor little bastards had monkey-shit floating all around them. They were practically swimming in their own crap. It was plastered to their fur, but they didn't care. All they could do was enter the same first-grade equation into that stupid computer, again and again and . . ."

Sugar picked up his beer and took a long drink. Talking about the Rhesus monkeys had hit a nerve. I had seen it before; people get upset when they see cruelty to animals. It's a little bizarre, sometimes, the priorities we make. This was a man who had once dropped bombs on a densely populated Iraqi city, possibly killing scores of helpless civilians, and he was unsettled by the memory of two monkeys who had been . . .

Hypnotized? Brainwashed? I didn't think that it was possible to mesmerize a simian. I shot a look at McPherson. He was silent, his arms folded across his chest.

"What about the crew?" I asked softly.

Sugar had been taking it easy on the liquor until now. He paused to go to the bar, pour himself a shot of George Dickel, and pump it back before he returned to the booth. "I had just managed to get my helmet off," he said, "when the curtain of one of the sleep niches slid open and this guy pushes himself out. I found out later that he was one of the scientists, name of Robillard. George Robillard."

He picked up the beer pitcher and poured a chaser into his mug. "But by then, I could hear this voice speaking from the other end of the module. I had been hearing it through my helmet since I'd first come into the station, but now I could make it out distinctly. At first I thought someone was reciting a poem, but then I realized that someone was reading aloud. At least, that was what I thought it was."

He shrugged. "Then out comes this George Robillard, who tells me he was asleep when the *Blues* docked and didn't know I was there. That's when he tells me that he and another guy, named Eric Schwinn, are the only two guys left alive. Ned Hersh, the team leader, had been down in Module Two when the accident had happened. There had been a blowout, but he stayed in there to transmit a Mayday before the emergency hatches had autosealed and locked him inside."

"Hersh was dead?" I asked.



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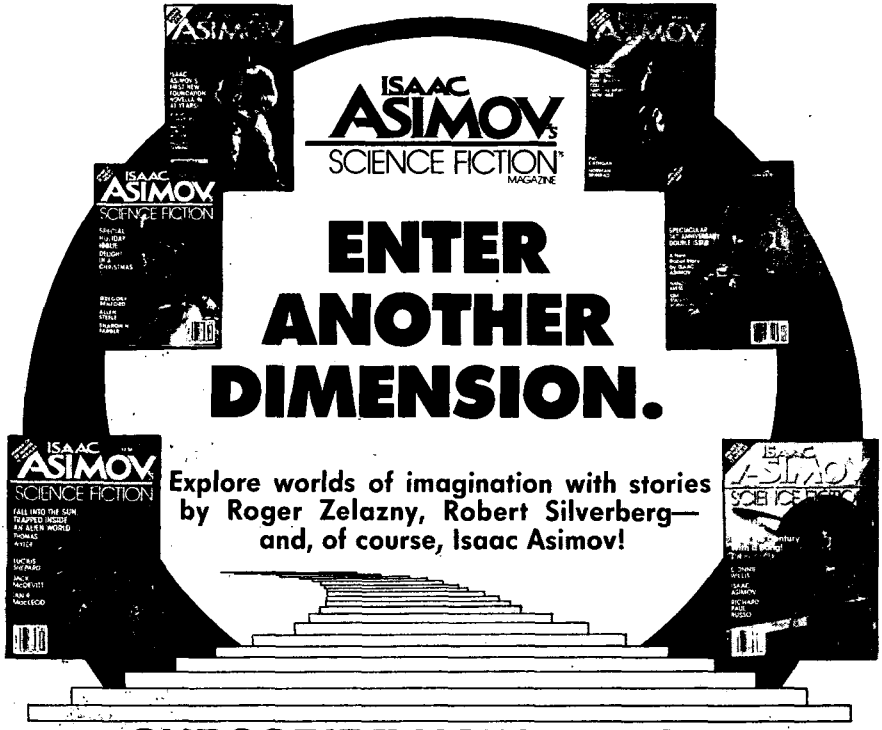
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Stupid question, but I had to be sure. Sugar didn't notice. "As a doornail. Robillard and Schwinn had been holding out for a rescue attempt. He was kinda surprised that it was from the Cape, though, 'cause he thought someone from Phoenix Station would be on their way."

Doug cleared his throat and Sugar looked toward him. "Mike and I had been monitoring all this through the comlink," McPherson said, "but Mike had shut down the feed to the Cape and Huntsville as soon as the boss had started talking about the monkeys. He dicked around with the radio and caused some fuzz before he told CapCom that we were losing our telemetry with the comsats, but it was really because we were beginning to smell a rat. So the boys back home didn't hear everything that was going on up there."

"Right," Sugar said. "Anyway, so I say to Robillard. 'Well, the cab's here and we've got the meter running, so you can get your friend Rick to stop reading aloud to pass the time.' It was supposed to be a joke, but he doesn't see it that way. 'Maybe you ought to see this,' he says to me, then he leads me down the passageway to another niche, where the voice is coming from. He pushes back the curtain and . . ."

Sugar paused. He clenched his hands together again, not looking at me as he continued. "Jesus Christ," he whispered, almost too inaudibly for my recorder to pick up. "I'll never forget that moment."

I waited until he was ready to speak again. When Sugar returned from the depths of his memory, his voice was hollow and flat. "Schwinn was zipped into his sleep restraint, all the way up to his neck," he said. "The only light in the niche came from a little reading lamp above his head and there was a paperback book floating in midair nearby, but he wasn't reading it. The book was *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* by Ernest Hemingway, but it wasn't in his hands and he wasn't reading from it. He was . . ."

His voice trailed off again. "What was he doing?" I asked.

"He was *reciting* it," Sugar said. "Aloud. Every line, as perfect as if he had spent months memorizing the whole blamed thing. And the *look* on his face, it was . . ."

He sucked in his breath, visibly trying to steady himself. "He looked like the monkeys in the cages, but worse. His eyes were glazed, his head was lolling forward. His face was completely dead. Just staring straight ahead like a zombie, while the words came pouring out of his mouth. He didn't notice me or the other guy, not even when I clapped my hands and shouted his name. I pushed myself right in front of him and stuck a penlight in his eyes, and though the pupils contracted normally, he barely responded. It was if he had been lobotomized or something."

He picked up his beer and took a sip. I noticed that his hands were trembling ever so slightly. "So I turn around to Robillard and I say,



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'What's going on with this guy? Is he on drugs or something? Make him stop talking, for God's sake.' And that's when Robillard breaks down and tells me . . . tells *us*, since Mike and Doug can hear us through the comlink . . . the whole thing."

Sugar put down his beer and looked at me. "That's when we first heard about Project Flashback."

While Saltzman and Robillard unzipped Schwinn from his cocoon and began to haul the scientist toward the node hatch, Robillard explained what had happened to Schwinn and Hersh.

For the past several years, Space BioTech had been developing a drug which would enhance short-term memory. The principal objective had been to produce a pharmaceutical substance which would provide a clinical antidote for Alzheimer's Disease, but there was also hope within the biotech firm and its parent company that they could also spin-off a non-prescription derivative—already called Flashback—which would be an over-the-counter recreational drug. Although the clinical-issue drug would be more beneficial to medical science, Spectrum-Mellencamp believed that the *real* money would come from Flashback, and the project had swung in that direction.

The essential idea was that, since the mind tends to remember tactile pain but forget short-term pleasure experiences, Flashback would cross-wire the cerebral circuitry and perform the exact inverse function: it would allow the user to store away the sensory nuances of any given pleasurable act. After ingesting Flashback, a person could have a good meal, read a great novel, have sex or whatever, while under its influence. The immediate, real-time perception of the given experience would be subtly heightened, yet that would not be the real payoff; much later, after the drug had worn off, the memory of the experience would remain firmly engraved in your mind, able to be recalled precisely as it had happened. In theory, one would remember the best tastes of a meal enjoyed at a four-star restaurant, or favorite passages once read from a novel or short story, or the most orgasmic heights of lovemaking with one's partner, just as vividly as though you were living through it all over again. It would be similar to the flashbacks experienced by habitual LSD users, yet voluntary and without any of the nasty side-effects.

It was a risky proposition. The drug had to be completely perfect, safe, and non-habit-forming, or the FDA would never give approval. However, market analysts predicted that the company could potentially reap billions of dollars on worldwide sales, both in its clinical and recreational forms. After three years of top-secret research, Space BioTech had indeed theoretically developed the drug: as anticipated, though, its molecular composition was so complex and fragile that it could not be assembled



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within Earth-normal gravity. The final phases of R&D, therefore, would have to be in orbit, in the microgravity confines of Bios One, with the specially designed logistics module performing the final synthesis. If everything worked according to plan, Bios One would become the new space-based source of Flashback; the company's market analysts had even predicted that Flashback's mystique of having been produced in outer space would help to push sales.

This had been the plan, yet the final R&D phase had taken much longer than expected. The spacelab's log-mod was a sophisticated machine, worth almost as much as the rest of the space station itself, but it couldn't perform miracles. The wildly complex chemical matrix had stubbornly resisted molecular bonding; more tinkering had been required. Instead of two months, the space-based R&D of Flashback had stretched into a year. Six different three-person crews had had to be shuttled up to Bios One over the past twelve months; the resultant cost-overruns were staggering.

Spectrum-Mellencamp had already lost tons of money on a blood-serum anticoagulant which had failed in the marketplace, and its board of directors were beginning to suspiciously reassess the millions of dollars that had already been spent on Project Flashback. If that kind of spending went on much longer, the parent company might be forced not only to dump Flashback, but Space BioTech as well.

Pressure came from the top down, extending from the executive boardroom of Spectrum-Mellencamp to the basic-research labs of Space BioTech. While they were in space, Robillard, Schwinn, and Hersh suddenly found their careers on the line. If Team Six didn't come home with something useful, then the whole thing was kaput; Spectrum-Mellencamp would dump Space Biotech, and since there was a recession currently in progress, there was little chance that the little company—with no orbital facilities of its own, since Bios One belonged to Spectrum-Mellencamp—would be repurchased by any other space company. Team Six had to produce or perish. And then, two days before the accident, the message was received from the powers-that-be that they were expected to board a Galileo Inc. spaceplane which was scheduled to be launched from the Cape in less than a week to collect them from Bios One . . . with or without satisfactory results.

It was time to shit or get off the pot. Fish or cut bait. The three scientists were now under an extraordinary deadline; their jobs would be forfeit if they came back from orbit with little or nothing to show for it. However, the latest batch of Flashback produced by the log-mod had looked particularly promising. They had tried it out on spacelab's Rhesus monkeys, and although the apes had trouble responding to external stimuli while under its influence, at least they were able to reproduce the


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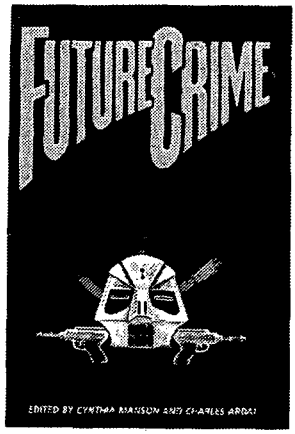


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arithmetic-test which had been established to judge the drug's effectiveness.

Yet this still wasn't sufficient proof. They needed stronger evidence that Flashback worked. Ned Hersh, as station manager and team leader, decided to take the ultimate risk: he would try the drug himself. Robillard had argued against it, but Schwinn had been more pragmatic. At this juncture, they were damned if they did and damned if they didn't. It was Jekyll-and-Hyde territory, completely unethical if not reckless, yet it seemed the only way to go. Team Six didn't have the luxury of safe, protracted experimentation; if they didn't come home with something worth showing to Spectrum-Mellencamp's directors, they wouldn't have a laboratory in which to experiment in anyway.

So Hersh had ingested a low concentration of the new batch, then sat back and begun to read a computer-maintenance manual, the most boring literature he could find aboard the station. After a few hours, Hersh reported no problems; even after he closed the book, though, he could recite from it line by line, with perfect clarity and total recall.

So far, so good, but Schwinn had not been satisfied. He insisted upon trying a slightly higher concentration. Again, Robillard had argued against it—the Rhesus monkeys, the first test-group, had still not come out of their trance—but Robillard impatiently believed that a real acid-test was needed. So he dosed himself with Flashback, then picked up more complex—and more interesting—reading material, the Hemingway paperback with which he had been entertaining himself over the past few weeks. Robillard remained undosed, as much out of revulsion at becoming a guinea pig as from the necessity of being the experiment's control-subject.

The dual experiments had occurred at 1800 and 2000 respectively, the day before the accident. By 2300, Robillard had sensed trouble. Although Hersh had finished reading the manual, he had difficulty in concentrating on anything else; Schwinn had whipped through *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* and even insisted upon re-reading it, refusing to be distracted. By 0030, Schwinn was in an almost hypnotic state; he was beginning to repeat Hemingway's prose verbatim, aloud. Hersh, however, had seemed at least basically functional, although his thought-processes were muddled. An OTV was scheduled for docking in only a short time; since Robillard was not trained to handle the teleoperational docking maneuver, Hersh insisted that he was capable of handling it from the command module. While Robillard confined Schwinn to his niche and stood watch over him, the station manager had gone below to bring in the cargo vessel.

But Hersh had been too distracted by his out-of-control flashbacks of a simple computer manual to handle the complex docking procedure. In


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the final phases of the maneuver, while he was in direct teleoperational control of the OTV, he had lost his bearings. Helplessly stoned on Flashback, he entered the wrong set of commands into the computer guidance program, causing the OTV's main engine to misfire.

Robillard believed that Hersh's distress signal had been the last cogitant thing the man had done. It was possible that, even as the module's atmosphere was being sucked out by explosive decompression, Hersh had been unable to remember where the exit hatch was located. The elegant beauty of schematic diagrams had been too much for him; Robillard had not even heard him scream.

The door opened just then, and Mike Green stuck his head inside. "Car just cruised by twice on the highway," he said softly as we looked up. "Went up the road, turned around, and came back again. Couldn't see who was inside, but it looked like one of our pals was driving."

Sugar calmly picked up his beer. "Probably them. Think they saw you?" Mike shook his head, and Sugar shrugged nonchalantly. "Well, even if they didn't, they must have seen our cars. Unless they're really stupid, they know we're in here." He took a sip. "Time to finish up, gang. It's last call."

Mike shut the door, returning to his sentry post. Sugar chugged the last of his beer as indifferently as if we had been discussing Miami's chances of going to the National League play-offs. Doug closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the seat; he looked as if he was ready to doze off in the booth. Perhaps the Blues Brothers had become used to being shadowed by thugs in cheap suits, but just being with them was making *me* nervous. My house was almost ten miles away in Cocoa Beach; I had an ancient car which could barely get up to forty, and a tape recorder filled with one of the most incriminating interviews I had ever done. Sugar and his crewmates could handle a pair of goons, but I was only too aware that it was a moonless night and that, in the wee hours of Sunday morning, Route 3 becomes one hell of a dark, lonesome highway.

"So, anyway, we bundled Robillard, Schwinn, and the two monkeys into *Blue*'s mid-deck," Sugar continued, "then I put on my helmet and repressurized my suit and went down to Module One to retrieve Hersh's body." His face went grim as he spoke. "I've seen my share of death, son, but what happened to that man was the ugliest thing I've ever seen. . . ."

I quickly nodded my head and held up my hand. I knew all about the effects of sudden decompression upon the human body. More than a few drunken beamjacks and moondogs had entertained me with their favorite real-life horror stories, and I didn't need to hear one more detailed account of exploded entrails and frozen blood. There are journalists who


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thrive on that sort of thing, but I've never been one to rush to see gruesome traffic accidents or weird murder scenes. I sleep better that way.

Thankfully, Sugar noticed the expression on my face and spared me the gory part. "Well, once I got Hersh into a body-bag and Sir Douglas loaded him into a locker in the mid-deck, it was time for me to EVA."

Doug cleared his throat and half-opened his eyes. "We were hearing from the Cape again," he murmured. "Mike couldn't keep up the come-in-Tokyo shit any longer by then. Ed Collier sounded so genuinely relieved that we had managed to rescue two of his people, he *almost* forgot to tell us for the fiftieth time that they wanted the log-mod brought home." He closed his eyes again. "Fucking asshole."

"We had done this sort of thing on the RWS before," Sugar said, "so Doug and I didn't need a rehearsal. Once I got outside the station, I got on the cherry-picker, he raised me up and swung me around until I was above and behind the logistics module. It took me only a half-hour to unbolt the sucker from its node . . . after that, I would hang onto it while Doug hauled us both back into the *Blue*'s cargo bay, where I would tuck it down in the payload cradle for the ride home. Easy job. We've done it a dozen times."

"We were on an open comlink again," Doug said, "so we couldn't talk freely, and CapCom had insisted that I switch on the cargo bay TV camera and turn it toward the boss so they could see what he was doing out there."

Sugar barely paid attention to him. His eyes wandered toward the ceiling as he spoke, as if he was again gazing into an abyss which only a relative handful of men and women have seen."But thirty minutes is a long time, y'know, when you're out there by your lonesome. Lot of time for a man to start wondering about things. While I was unbolting the module, I kept looking down at fat ol' mother Earth, and I started thinking. . . ."

He sighed. "Well, about people. Nobody in particular, just people in general. Kids, mainly. I've got one myself . . . Ted Jr., a freshman in college now. And I thought, y'know, one of these days, something like Flashback might be out there on the streets. I mean, acid was first made in a lab by scientists, with all the best intentions, and look what happened there. And then there was crack and ecstasy and bizarro and all that other shit that has been fucking people up for years. How long would it be before Flashback squirmed out of this company's labs? Even if it *didn't* become legal, how long would it be before it got out there anyway, as an illegal street drug? Who would be the first dumb kid to buy a hit on a basketball court? Hell, what if Ted gets hold of something like this? Is he going to become another basket case like poor Schwinn?"

Sugar looked down from the ceiling, his gaze returning to me. "Well,


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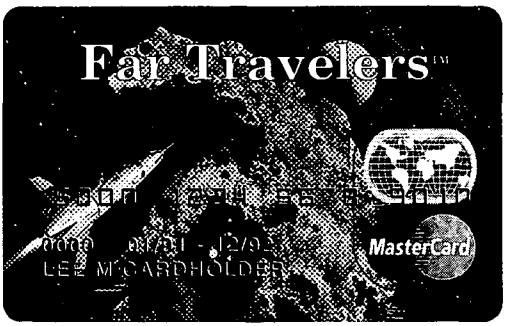


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ADDRESS | CITY | STATE | ZIP CODE | YEARS THERE

PREVIOUS ADDRESS | CITY | STATE | ZIP CODE | YEARS THERE

PRESENT EMPLOYER | WORK PHONE ( ) - | YEARS THERE

PREVIOUS EMPLOYER (if with present employer less than one year) | WORK PHONE ( ) - | YEARS THERE

GROSS ANNUAL INCOME* $ | TOTAL MONTHLY PAYMENTS (INCLUDE HOME, CAR, PERSONAL, CREDIT CARD LOANS, ETC.) $ | PREFERRED CREDIT LIMIT $

NEAREST RELATIVE NOT LIVING WITH ME | RELATIONSHIP | TELEPHONE ( ) -

**CO–APPLICANT INFORMATION**

FIRST NAME | INITIAL | LAST NAME

DATE OF BIRTH / / | SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER — — | HOME PHONE ( ) -

ADDRESS | CITY | STATE | ZIP CODE | YEARS THERE

PREVIOUS ADDRESS | CITY | STATE | ZIP CODE | YEARS THERE

PRESENT EMPLOYER | WORK PHONE ( ) - | YEARS THERE

PREVIOUS EMPLOYER (if with present employer less than one year) | WORK PHONE ( ) - | YEARS THERE

GROSS ANNUAL INCOME* $ | TOTAL MONTHLY PAYMENTS (INCLUDE HOME, CAR, PERSONAL, CREDIT CARD LOANS, ETC.) $

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there I was, hanging onto a big tin can filled with this evil shit. All there is of it in the world, right there in my hands. Everything they needed to know about how to make *more* was in the thing, too. The basic data had been in the Module One computers, but even if it hadn't been fried during the accident, we hadn't downloaded any of it. Bios One was going to burn up in the atmosphere in just a few days, anyway. No wonder Collier was so hot on getting this thing brought home. Since Robillard had told me Spectrum-Mellencamp had taken a beating from developing Flashback in the first place, they weren't likely to finance another expensive round of R&D. If the module was lost, maybe someday somebody else in some other space lab would learn how to make the shit anyway—but, considering all the millions that had already been poured down the rathole, maybe they *wouldn't*, either . . ."

I could already tell what was coming next. "What about your career?" I asked.

Sugar shrugged his shoulders. "If they knew about what had happened, sure, I was in trouble . . . but I had the module between me and the TV camera, so they couldn't see exactly what I was doing, right?"

He lifted his arms above his head. "So, as soon as I had it unbolted and I had told Doug here to bring me in, I held onto it for a few seconds longer. . . ."

Sugar grinned, then thrust his arms straight up. "Then I pushed the fucker away as hard as I could."

McPherson burped and nodded his head. "God bless you, Sir Isaac Newton."

That should have been the end of the story. The logistics module, propelled away from the spacelab's already-unstable orbit, tumbled down Earth's gravity well, picking up velocity with each passing minute. Retrieval by the *Sugar's Blues* was impossible; by the time Saltzman came back aboard and the shuttle undocked from Bios One, the log-mod was already beyond reach. Although Collier was screaming bloody murder at the apparent snafu, the ground controllers at KSC agreed that pursuing the falling module couldn't be done without considerable risk to the spacecraft and its crew and passengers. And besides, hadn't the most important part of the rescue mission been accomplished? By the time *Sugar's Blues* made the deorbit burn for the return to the Cape, the module had entered the upper atmosphere above New Zealand and had been destroyed.

That should have been the end of the story, but it wasn't.

"When we had landed back at the Cape, there was an ambulance waiting to take Robillard and Schwinn away," Sugar said. "That was the last I ever saw of either of them. I saw some guys from Space BioTech


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unloading the cages with the monkeys, but when I asked about them later, I was told that the apes had died of natural causes shortly after landing. Cardio-vascular stress or something like that. But by then, we already knew we were in trouble."

McPherson picked up the pitcher and poured the last of the warm beer into his mug. "Spectrum-Mellencamp smelled a rat and Collier demanded a NASA review board hearing," he said, "but there was nothing anyone could prove. Losing the log-mod was an unfortunate accident, and the boss got an official reprimand." He grinned and reached over to slap the back of Sugar's wrist. "Shame on you! Losing a precious module like that! You've been a bad boy! Bad, bad, bad!"

Sugar smiled slightly, but otherwise his face remained serious. "Spectrum-Mellencamp's lawyers produced transcripts of our flight-recorder logs to show that there had been an unexplained comlink blackout during the mission, along with the film of the pictures Doug had taken during our primary approach to the station, but they couldn't prove anything. They didn't come right out and say it, but they tried to claim that we had conspired to destroy the logistics module."

"Well, they were right, weren't they?" I asked.

Sugar pursed his lips and shook his head. "No, not really. Mike and Doug weren't in on it until I told them about it while we were on the flight deck during the LOS." LOS meant loss-of-signal; spacecraft always experience it during re-entry through Earth's ionosphere. Nature has its convenient moments. "It was my decision to chuck the log-mod, but it was their option whether to come clean or to support my story that the module had slipped out of my hands while the cherry-picker was in motion."

He folded his arms across his chest. "They stuck with me, though, and we kept our stories straight during the hearing. Nobody could pin anything on us. Even though Spectrum-Mellencamp knew we had a bogus cover-story, they couldn't come right out and say *why* we would have wanted to get rid of a valuable log-mod. That would have meant admitting the existence of Flashback."

"But what did Robillard have to say?" I asked. "And what happened to Schwinn?"

If there was any trace of smugness about Sugar Saltzman, it vanished immediately. He looked down at the table, his mouth tightening.

"So far as anyone knows, Schwinn is still in a mental institution," McPherson said quietly. "The company line was that he had suffered a complete nervous breakdown when Hersh had been killed. Bullshit about how they had been gay lovers up there and so forth. There was written testimony from Robillard supporting that claim, but he never appeared


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himself during the hearing." He raised an eyebrow. "About a week later, he suffered a massive stroke and died. Kind of coincidental, right?"

I felt myself getting cold.

"Of course, *we* couldn't tell anyone the truth about Flashback, either," Sugar said. He looked back up at me, propping his elbows on the table and clasping his hands together in an almost prayerlike gesture. "If we had, then we would have been admitting our own guilt. Disregarding NASA regs, deliberately destroying valuable hardware." He shrugged and lightly clapped his hands. "And since Spectrum-Mellencamp was claiming that their scientists had been working on a new form of blood anti-coagulant, it was our word against theirs that Flashback even existed, or that it was a dangerous drug that had to be destroyed."

"And you know what a lawyer would ask," Doug muttered. "Define 'dangerous.' Define 'drug.' . . ."

"Define existence. Define responsibility." Sugar sighed and shook his head. "So there it was. Neither of us were willing to come out and tell the truth, so it was kind of a stalemate. We were willing to let it go at that. I was just happy that we had managed to get rid of the shit before the company figured out where they had gone wrong and tried to refine the stuff. Bios One burned up in the atmosphere, so all the current data on Project Flashback was lost when it went down for the count. That should have been the end of things."

"Then you guys were busted. . . ." I said.

"And we were grounded and lost our jobs." Saltzman slowly nodded his head. "Yeah, it was a frame-up. The dope in the lockers, the phony drug-test report, the whole schmeer." He stretched back his arms, laying them across the back of his seat. "They must have had help on the inside to do all that, so my guess is that people within Skycorp and NASA were paid off. Again, there was nothing we could prove."

McPherson drank from his mug. "At first, we thought they were just trying to get revenge," he said, "but then we started getting the phone calls. Sounded sort of like Collier, but we could never be sure. Just this voice, warning us to keep our mouths shut or things would get worse."

"And then we started getting followed." Sugar picked up the pitcher, saw that it was empty, and put it back on the table with mild disappointment. "Guys in cars following our wives and kids, guys in cars parked outside our houses. That's been going on for about the last year or so. And now tonight. . . ."

Doug hissed and slammed his mug down on the table. "I had had enough of these watchdogs," he hissed angrily. "Yeah, I was a little drunk, but when I see some dudes sitting right next to me, watching me while I'm trying to have a good time . . . well, I got a little pissed. So I


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stood up and asked them to leave, and one of 'em gives me this shit-eating grin and asks me why. . . ."

"And you decked him," I finished.

McPherson smiled and belched into his hand. "No apologies on that score. It felt real fucking good."

"And now you know everything," Sugar said. He clapped his hand on McPherson's shoulder and gave his former cargo jockey a shake. "So what do you think?" he asked, looking at me. "Is this a good story for your paper, or what?"

It was a damn good story.

We left Diamondback Jack's right after that. Jack Baker came out of his office and locked up behind us, never saying a word to any of us. By unspoken agreement, the Blues Brothers left the parking lot before me; they piled into an old Dodge pickup truck, with Sugar behind the wheel. He revved the engine and spun gravel as he tore out of the parking lot, making as much noise as possible, while I hung back in the shadows of the bar. Almost as soon as he had ripped down Route 3, a pair of headlights appeared on the road, and a late-model Ford screamed down the highway behind them. I waited until the night was still and quiet again, then I got in my car, tucked my recorders and notebook beneath the seat, and took a different route home. I was scared shitless until I pulled into my driveway.

Sunday was spent transcribing the interview tape and collating my notes; by Monday morning, I was on the phone, attempting to confirm the allegations. I spent the next four days bird-dogging the story. Sugar Saltzman and Doug McPherson were on the record, but I wasn't surprised that no one else would speak with equal candor.

Edward Collier at Space BioTech consistently remained unavailable for comment; he was always in a meeting and he never returned my calls. Spokespersons at Space BioTech and Spectrum-Mellencamp gave bland, PR-robot responses to my questions; they had never heard of Project Flashback and had never been involved in memory-enhancement experiments. Some of them claimed never to have heard of Bios One. Attempting to contact higher officials in the company was futile, except when I got an executive vice-president from Spectrum-Mellencamp who hogged a solid twenty minutes of tape telling me about his company's fine accomplishments in agriculture and famine-relief, then hung up before I could ask my first solid question. Skycorp told me that it didn't discuss the records of their current and former employees. NASA, as usual, lived up to the rep which long-ago had earned it the press-corps interpretation of its initials: Never A Straight Answer.

Eventually, though, I learned three things.


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First, a lab analyst for the small Tampa-based biotech firm which had handled the drug tests that had been given to the Blues Brothers admitted—on the record, but without attribution—that it was possible that the results of the hair and urine samples which had been submitted by Saltzman, Green, and McPherson could have been doctored. The lab wasn't completely secure and the vials could have been switched, or someone could have tampered with the computer analysis of the valid tests. It had been done before in that selfsame lab; indeed, all that would have been necessary to produce the most damning evidence would have been the switching of labels on a few test-tubes.

Second, a biotechnology analyst from a Wall Street brokerage told me that one of the hottest targets for the biotech industry was the development of a memory-enhancement drug, and that Spectrum-Mellencamp was indeed a contender in the race. She also said it was conceivable that such a pharmaceutical, if it was ever manufactured, could eventually lead to the marketing of a street-legal recreational drug; the FDA could be cowed if the clinicals turned out correctly. The notion unsettled her as much as did me.

Third, after contacting a leading aerospace contractor, I found that Spectrum-Mellencamp was spending several hundred million dollars for the construction of Bios Two, the replacement for the spacelab they had lost. One of the principal components of the new station was to be a logistics module, dedicated to the space-based refinement of pharmaceuticals. Skycorp had been subcontracted by Spectrum-Mellencamp to place the new station in orbit sometime within the next two fiscal years.

By Friday, I had enough solid info to use in the story. It would be one shit-hot work of investigative journalism: the secret development of a dangerous drug, the resultant deaths of two scientists who had been directly involved in the project, another scientist driven insane by bizarre drug side-effects, the cover-up which had annihilated the careers of a living legend and his crew. All the denials and greed and lies. The sort of story a working journalist spends his life dreaming about, the stuff from which Pulitzers are made. In a breathless plunge, I spent a full day writing the final draft and faxed it straight to the paper. A senior editor immediately called to play Twenty Questions; satisfied, he hung up after telling me that I had just made his day.

Everything I knew went into the article . . . including its principal source, Diamondback Jack's.

In my headlong rush to double-check everything, I had completely forgotten my vow to Jack Baker. In the third and fifth paragraphs of the story, I mentioned that the interviews with Sugar Saltzman and Doug McPherson had taken place in the bar, following a violent fight with a couple of corporate henchmen who had been shadowing them for the past


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year. I called Diamondback Jack's by its name, even mentioned its exact location on Merritt Island.

Substantiation of fact is the operative term in the news business. Breaking a promise is what they call it in real life.

My article appeared on the front page of the Sunday edition of the *Times*, in a center box above the fold. I didn't go down to the bar that night; when I saw the article and realized what I had done, I swore to myself that, sometime in the next week, I would drop by and try to make my peace with Jack Baker. That, or give him a chance to give me his best swing with that Louisville Slugger he kept beneath the counter. Sometime in the next week, or the next month, after the heat had blown over.

But the heat didn't blow over; I had shed light, so naturally there was combustion to go with it.

They didn't retaliate against me. Only amateurs and religious fanatics try to take revenge upon reporters, because you have to kill 'em to make sure that they won't write about you again . . . and even then, there's no guarantee that the guy at the *next* desk won't be assigned to pick up where the first one left off. And they couldn't try any more shit with the Blues Brothers; after the story was published, if Sugar had even stubbed his toe, it would have been blamed on Spectrum-Mellencamp. No, when they decided to strike back, they had to pick another target.

The night my article was published in the *Times*, in the early Monday morning hours shortly after Jack had chased out the last drunks in his bar and gone home, someone broke into his bar and torched the joint. The potent combination of old timber, alcohol, grease, and vile rumors caused the place to burn to the foundations before the first trucks arrived on the scene. The county fire marshal later confirmed that it was arson; with three separate points of origin, it sure as hell wasn't caused by a carelessly discarded cigarette.

I can't honestly say that I miss the place. It was one of the seediest low-rent dives I've ever hung out in. Nonetheless, it was a part of the Cape's history, a place where both the best and the worst of the high frontier found common ground, if only in complaining about the foul bathrooms and the seldom-swept floors. Its demise is symbolic of the passing of an era; we're entering a dangerous new age in this so-called conquest of space, and even the old familiar hangouts of washed-up astronauts and deadbeat reporters are possible targets.

Bios Two will not be built; Spectrum-Mellencamp and Space BioTech are now under criminal investigation by a federal grand jury, and it's possible that some people will go to prison. Sugar Saltzman's good name has been restored: although he's in retirement, I've lately heard that


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Green's and McPherson's flight status has been reinstated by NASA. Sometimes the good guys win, after all.

But no one ever tells me secrets anymore. I still go to the press conferences, pick up the news releases, and rewrite them as news stories for the *Times*, but my usefulness as a space reporter has been shot. When a journalist betrays his sources, his career is effectively over. He's untrustworthy, a bad risk, and everyone knows it. That's why I drink alone now.

But, like I said, truth is a dangerous business. The public has a right to know. Right?

Right? ●

*(The author extends his appreciation to Gregory Benford for his contribution to this story.)*

## FROM: A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

### QUOTATION MARKS

I said—
"I'm sorry: what'd you say?
Your words just seemed to drift away."
I *said,* before you broke me off—
"How's that again? Did you just cough?"
I *said* that when a person speaks—
"All I can hear are squeals and squeaks."
—his speech appears upon the page—
"You'll never make it on the stage."
—inside of squiggles that we call—
"You seem to be behind a wall."
—quotation marks, by which we know—
"Could be your volume's turned too low."
—that someone's *talking.* Would you please—
"At most I hear a kind of breeze."
—take off your Walkman and listen to me?
"Sorry, Mack, but I don't see
A pair of squiggles when you speak.
Must be your batteries are weak."

—Tom Disch


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# PICKMAN'S MODEM

## by Lawrence Watt-Evans

"Pickman's Modem" is a play on H.P. Lovecraft's classic story, "Pickman's Model." The title for the modern tale originated during a real-time chat on a computer network. The living author's short story collection, *Crosstime Traffic*, will be out soon from Del Rey.

I hadn't seen Pickman on-line for some time; I thought he'd given up on the computer nets. You can waste hours every day reading and posting messages, if you aren't careful, and the damn things are addictive; they can take up your entire life if you aren't careful. The nets will eat you alive if you let them.

Some people just go cold turkey when they realize what's happening, and I thought that was what had happened to Henry Pickman, so I was pleased and surprised when I saw the heading scroll across my monitor screen, stating that the next post had originated from his machine. Henry Pickman was no Einstein or Shakespeare, but his comments were usually entertaining, in an oafish sort of way. I had rather missed them during his absence.

"From the depths I return and greet you all," I read. "My sincerest apologies for any inconvenience that my withdrawal might have occasioned."

*That* didn't sound at *all* like the Henry Pickman I knew; surprised, I read on, through three screens describing, with flawless spelling and mordant wit, the trials and tribulations of the breakdown of his old modem, and the acquisition of a new one. Lack of funds had driven him to desperate measures, but at last, by judicious haggling and trading, he had made himself the proud owner of a rather battered, but functional, second-hand 2400-baud external modem.

I posted a brief congratulatory reply, and read on.

When I browsed the message base the next day I found three messages from Pickman, each a small gem of sardonic commentary. I marveled at the improvement in Pickman's writing—in fact, I wondered whether it



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was really Henry Pickman at all, and not someone else using his account.

It was the day after that, the third day, that the flamewar began.

For those unfamiliar with computer networks, let me explain that in on-line conversation, the normal social restraints on conversation don't always work; as a result, minor disagreements can flare up into towering great arguments, with thousands of words of invective hurled back and forth along the phone lines. Emotions can run very high indeed. The delay in the system means that often, a retraction or an apology arrives too late to stop the war of words from raging out of control.

These little debates are known as "flamewars."

And Pickman's introductory message had triggered one. Some reader in Kansas City had taken offense at a supposed slur on the Midwest, and launched a flaming missive in Pickman's direction.

By the time I logged on and saw it, Pickman had already replied, some fifty messages or so down the bitstream, and had replied with blistering sarcasm and a vituperative tone quite unlike the rather laid-back Pickman I remembered. His English had improved, but his temper clearly had not.

I decided to stay out of this particular feud. I merely watched as, day after day, the messages flew back and forth, growing ever more bitter and vile. Pickman's entries, in particular, were remarkable in their viciousness, and in the incredible imagination displayed in his descriptions of his opponents. I wondered, more than ever, how this person could be little Henry Pickman, he of the sloppy grin and sloppier typing.

Within four or five days, both sides were accusing the other of deliberate misquotation, and I began to wonder if perhaps something even stranger than a borrowed account might not be happening.

I decided that drastic action was called for; I would drop in on Henry Pickman in person, uninvited, and talk matters over with him—*talk*, with our mouths, rather than type. Not at a net party, or a convention, but simply at his home. Accordingly, that Saturday afternoon found me on his doorstep, my finger on the bell.

"Yeah?" he said, opening the door, "Who is it?" He blinked up at me through thick glasses.

"Hi, Henry," I said, "It's me, George Polushkin—we met at the net party at Schoonercon."

"Oh, yeah!" he said, enlightenment dawning visibly on his face.

"May I come in?" I asked.

Fifteen minutes later, after a few uncomfortable silences and various mumbled pleasantries, we were both sitting in his living room, open cans of beer at hand, and he asked, "So, why'd you come, George? I mean, I wasn't, y'know, *expecting* you."



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"Well," I said, "It was good to see you back on the net, Henry . . ." I hesitated, unsure how to continue.

"You're pissed about the flamewar, huh?" He grinned apologetically.

"Well, yes," I admitted.

"Me, too," he said, to my surprise. "I don't understand what those guys are doing. I mean, they're *lying* about me, George, saying I said stuff that I didn't."

"You said that on-line," I said. "But I hadn't noticed any misquotations."

His mouth fell open and he stared at me, goggle-eyed. "But, George," he said, "*Look* at it!"

"I *have* looked, Henry," I said. "I didn't see any. They were using quoting software; they'd have to retype it to change what you wrote. Why would anyone bother to do that? Why should they change what you said?"

"I *don't know*, George, but they *did!*" He read the disbelief in my face, and said, "Come on, I'll show you! I logged everything!"

I followed him to his computer room—a spare bedroom upstairs held a battered IBM PC/AT and an assortment of other equipment, occupying a second-hand desk and several shelves. Print-outs and software manuals were stacked knee-deep on all sides. A black box, red lights glowering ominously from its front panel, was perched atop his monitor screen.

I stood nearby, peering over his shoulder, as he booted up his computer and loaded a log file into his text editor. Familiar messages appeared on the screen.

"Look at this," Henry said, "I got this one yesterday."

I had read this note previously; it consisted of a long quoted passage that suggested, in elaborate and revolting detail, unnatural acts that the recipient should perform, with explanations of why, given the recipient's ancestry and demonstrated proclivities, each was appropriate. The anatomical descriptions were thoroughly stomach-turning, but probably, so far as I could tell, accurate—no obvious impossibilities were involved.

The amount of fluid seemed a bit excessive, perhaps.

To this quoted passage, the sender had appended only the comment, "I can't believe you said that, Pickman."

"So?" I said.

"So, I *didn't* say that," Pickman said. "Of course I didn't!"

"But I read it . . ." I began.

"Not from *me*, you didn't!"

I frowned, and pointed out, "That quote has a date on it—I mean, when you supposedly sent it. And it was addressed to Pete Gifford. You didn't send him that message?"

"I posted a message to him that day, yeah, but it wasn't anything like *that!*"



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"Do you have it logged?"

"Sure."

He called up a window showing another file, scrolled through it, and showed me.

"PETE," the message read, "WHY DO'NT YUO GO F*CK YUORSELF THREE WAYS ANYWAY."

I read that, then looked at the other message, still on the main screen.

Three ways. One, two, three. In graphic detail.

I pointed this out.

"Yeah," Pickman said, "I guess that's where they got the idea, but I think it's pretty disgusting, writing something that gross and then blaming me for it."

"You really didn't write it?" I stared at the screen.

The message in the window was much more the old Henry Pickman style, but the other, longer one was what I remembered reading on my own machine.

"Let's look at some others," I suggested.

So we looked.

We found that very first message, which I had read as beginning, "From the depths I return and greet you all. My sincerest apologies for any inconvenience that my withdrawal might have occasioned."

Pickman's log showed that he had posted, "BAck from the pits—hi, Guys! Sorry I wuz gone, didja miss Me?"

"Someone," I said, "has been rewriting every word you've sent out since you got your new modem."

"That's silly," he said. I nodded.

"Silly," I said, "But true."

"How *could* anyone do that?" he asked, baffled.

I shrugged. "Someone is."

"Or something." He eyed the black box atop the monitor speculatively. "Maybe it's the modem," he said. "Maybe it's doing something weird."

I looked at the device; it was an oblong of black plastic, featureless save for the two red lights that shone balefully from the front and the small metal plate bolted to one side where incised letters spelled out, "Miskatonic Data Systems, Arkham MA, Serial #R1LYEH."

"I never heard of Miskatonic Data Systems," I said. "Is there a customer support number?"

He shrugged. "I got it second-hand," he said. "No documentation."

I considered the modem for several seconds, and had the uneasy feeling it was staring back at me. It was those two red lights, I suppose. There was something seriously strange about that gadget, certainly. It buzzed; modems aren't supposed to buzz. Theories about miniature AIs rambled through the back corridors of my brain; lower down were other theories



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I tried to ignore, theories about forces far more sinister. The brand name nagged at something, deep in my memory.

"It probably is the modem that's causing the trouble," I said. "Maybe you should get rid of it."

"But I can't *afford* another one!" he wailed.

I looked at him, then at the screen, where the two messages still glowed side by side in orange phosphor. I shrugged. "Well, it's up to you," I said.

"It isn't really *dangerous*, anyway," he said, trying to convince himself. "It just rewrites my stuff, makes it better. More powerful, y'know."

"I suppose," I said dubiously.

"I just need to be more careful about what I say," he said, wheedling

"You don't need to convince *me*," I said, "It's *your* decision."

We were both staring thoughtfully at the screen now.

"I've always wanted to write like that," he said, "But I just couldn't, you know, get the *hang* of it. All those rules and stuff, the spelling, and getting the words to sound good."

I nodded.

"You know," he said slowly, "I've heard that some magazines and stuff will take submissions by e-mail now."

"I've heard that," I agreed.

"You ready for another beer?"

And with that, the subject was closed; when I refused the offer of more beer, the visit, too, was at an end.

I never saw Pickman in the flesh again, but his messages were all over the nets in the subsequent weeks—messages that grew steadily stranger and more lurid. He spoke of submitting articles and stories, at first to the major markets, and then to others, ever more esoteric and bizarre. He posted long diatribes of stupendous fury and venom whenever a piece was rejected—the usual reason given was apparently that his new style was too florid and archaic.

Sometimes I worried about what he might be letting out into the net, but it wasn't really any of my business.

And then, after the last of April, though old messages continued to circulate for weeks, new ones no longer appeared. Henry Pickman was never heard from on the nets again, except once.

That once was netmail, a private message to me, sent at midnight on April 30.

"Goerge," it began—Henry never could spell—"I boroed another modem to log on, I could'nt trust it anymore, but I think its angry with me now. Its watching me, I sware it is. I unplugged it, but its watching me anyway. And I think its calling someone, I can hear it dialing.#$"

And then a burst of line noise; the rest of the message was garbage.

Line noise? Oh, that's when there's interference on the phone line, and



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the modem tries to interpret it as if it were a real signal. Except instead of words, you get nonsense. The rest of Henry's message was all stuff like "Iä! FThAGN!Iä!CTHulHu!"

I didn't hear anything from Henry after that. I didn't try to call him or anything; I figured it might all be a gag, and if it wasn't—well, if it wasn't, I didn't want to get involved.

So when I went past his place a couple of weeks later, I was just in the neighborhood by coincidence, you understand, I wasn't checking up on him. Anyway, his house was all boarded up, and it looked like there'd been a bad fire there.

I figured maybe the wiring in that cheap modem had been bad. I hoped no one had been hurt.

Yeah—bad wiring. That was probably it. Very bad.

After that, I sort of tapered off. Telecommunicating made me a bit uneasy; sometimes I almost thought my modem was watching me. So I don't use the nets any more. Ever.

After all, as I've always said, the nets will eat you alive if you let them. ●

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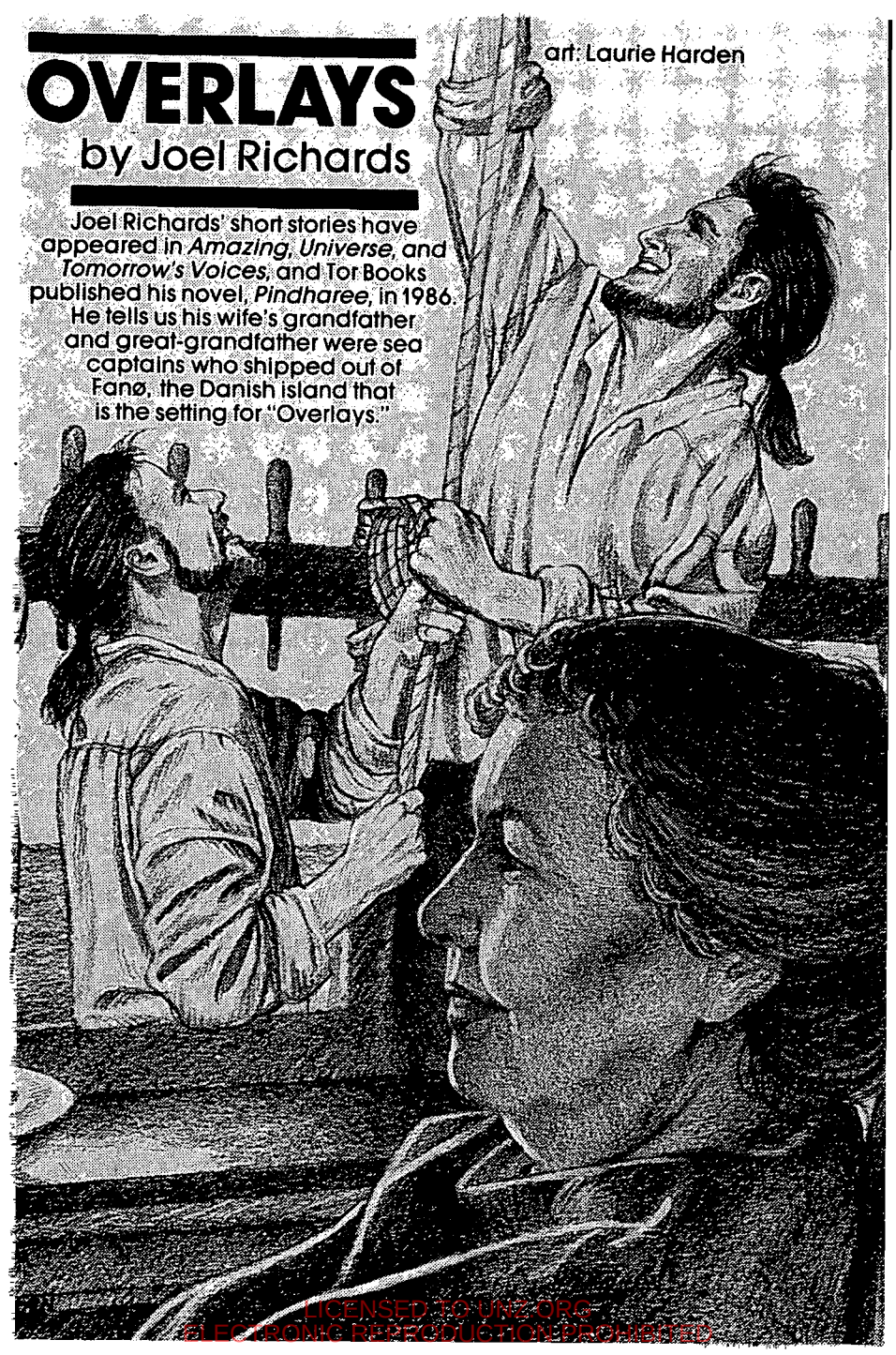
# OVERLAYS

## by Joel Richards

art: Laurie Harden

Joel Richards' short stories have appeared in *Amazing*, *Universe*, and *Tomorrow's Voices*, and Tor Books published his novel, *Pindharee*, in 1986. He tells us his wife's grandfather and great-grandfather were sea captains who shipped out of Fanø, the Danish island that is the setting for "Overlays."



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Freshfaced look. Sunwashed blond hair brushed straight across. Tanned legs beneath khaki hiking shorts. Aggressive confrontation of the great outdoors.

*German,* I thought, and was wrong.

"Excuse me," he said in deliberate measure and a distinct Yankee accent, "but do you speak English?"

"For seventy-five years," I said.

He started, but recovered fast.

"And the Queen's English at that!" he laughed. "No offense meant."

"That you took me for a Dane? I'm pleased. After all these decades assimilation must be working."

We were both laughing then, but there was a somber undertone to his mood. Cemeteries can do that, of course. This one certainly could.

We did our introductions. He was Benson Hunt, an easterner transplanted to California, and he was after some translating help on the monuments. We ended up before the grave of Hellmut Schmidt, a casualty of the Battle of Jutland. That put him into a reverie, what we once called a brown study. It was easy for me to follow.

I had first seen this grave and others forty years ago. The impact of discovery was still fresh in memory. So was the pain of immediacy.

It was a hot summer day, the kind epitomized by the classic Tuborg ad picturing a portly commercial traveler by the roadside, his collar undone, mopping his brow with a linen handkerchief. Unlike him, Ian—my second husband—and I had some Danish beer in our backpacks, still moderately cool. We leaned our bicycles and ourselves against the wall, drank our beers, then went absently inside to tour the cemetery.

Like many such, it was a historical record of sorts, spanning centuries. Many common family names repeated in a sprawling chronicle. Men died; women, too, some in childbirth. Children died, and the inscriptions bore witness to a parent's anguish and helplessness in days of limited medical resources and knowledge. Above all, seamen died, many far from home. Fanø has always provided seamen, as do Plymouth and Falmouth in England, Marblehead and Gloucester in America. The parish has erected an imposing monument to its sons who have died at sea. The list is long.

There are individual graves. There are several for seamen—both German and British—whose bodies washed up after the Battle of Jutland in that first World War to end all wars. Some have names, some do not.

There are stones from a later war to mark the graves of both German and British aviators who went down off the Danish coast. As had my youth's great love and husband of two months. He has no grave. Neither he nor his Hurricane were ever recovered. But here stood the grave of an unknown British airman and here stood Ian and I before it. My hand



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clutched his bare forearm in a grip that left nail marks. Ian said nothing of it, but I noticed them that night.

Ian was a sensitive and considerate man and the stabilizing influence of my life. His considerably greater years gave him a keen insight into my needs. Keener than my own. He pulled me away gently, led me to our cycles and tilted mine into my hand. I would have liked another beer then, and a stiff Danish schnapps. Ian knew that, and saw that I got them, soonest.

That was years ago, but still I find a strong schnapps a good idea on such occasions. Standing beside this unaccountably pensive young American, looking at the salt-eroded inscription on a German sailor's tombstone . . . ought I to invite him for a bracer at my Fanø summer-house? Brooding on mortality did not become one of such an age, unless he fancied himself a Byronic romantic. And tan, blond, brisk striding Benson Hunt did not look the part.

"Does this seaman's grave hold some meaning for you?" I asked.

"Yes, very much so."

I didn't press him to elaborate. I abhor nosy old women. Or men, either. I can't help my age, but I can control my tongue.

"This long dead seaman is going to spur some very imminent action." He paused and looked at me owlishly, grinning at my involuntarily raised eyebrow. "That must sound cryptic, even silly."

"I like puzzles," I said. "Even occasional silliness."

"I'll unravel the puzzle," he said. "But to do it I need to know more about this island. Perhaps you'd meet me in Nordby for afternoon coffee. First I've got some thinking to do, and writing, and a trip to the post office before it closes and my resolve melts away. Do you think they have a copy machine among the silversmiths and bakeries and amber shops in that old town?"

"Copy machines and a fax machine, too, if you're in a rush. I used them only yesterday to copy and send a journal article to a colleague at Oxford."

Benson Hunt looked like a man who had taken several jolts this day. No one likes being serially nonplussed.

"I'm afraid I'm shattering illusions," I said gently, but with a touch of mischief. "I'm not the foreign born widow of an old Danish seadog, here to tend his island grave. I'm just a retired biology professor with a summer house nearby."

"Please meet me in town," Hunt said, with a quiet intensity. "I'll promise you a look at the stuff journal articles are made of. Or papers of commitment."

I own a summer house in the dunes and sandgrass of Fanø, a weathered



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island off the west coast of Jutland. Many of my countrymen know little of Denmark. They get much of their butter, bacon and ham from Denmark, and that they know. People are generally interested in their stomachs and what goes into them. Sometimes where it comes from.

Mention the city of Esbjerg, across the channel from Fanø, and from where the container ships carrying that bacon and butter issue forth, and an Englishman will look blank. Tell him that it is in Jutland, and he'll show recognition. We do know our naval battles. There are many families with relatives who fought, some with relatives who died in the Battle of Jutland.

It was a later battle, a long and extended one without a name, that involved me in Fanø. I have spoken of that already.

I winter in London now, but I summer in Denmark. Very few houses on Fanø are meant for winter living, only the older houses in the towns of Nordby and Sønderho. I don't want a drafty older house to tend and I don't want to live in town. Town is not what Fanø is to me.

I say that I own a summer house on Fanø, but that is a fiction. Doubly so. It has been said that one never owns real estate; one holds only a lifetime lease. If that is true, it can be no more so than in Denmark. Ice ages, interstadial ages, warming periods come and go, and so does Denmark. Eighteen thousand years ago Denmark was under ice. Seven thousand years ago the land mass that is Denmark was larger. But now the sea—around Fanø, at least—is currently adding to the land area by storm and tidal sand accretion. Still, if global warming trends continue, perhaps much of Denmark will slip beneath the waves as the ice caps melt.

It will not take a lot, as much of Denmark is not many meters above sea level, and quite flat. It is ideal panzer tank terrain. That is another reason why I am an anomaly in my ownership—however ephemeral—of a piece of Denmark. Many Germans like to vacation in Denmark and its offshore islands. These days they come with windsurfers rather than weapons, and they are tolerated if not universally liked. The Danes have passed a law prohibiting the ownership of certain types of real estate by foreigners. They are far too polite and politic to specify nationalities, and so I must own my house—if such I do—through the offices of a Danish nominee, my friend Andreassen.

I am sitting in my summer house now, at the breakfast table. The sky through my casement windows is an offshore metropolis of cumulus towers, each building on the base of the ones beneath. This is a common cloud/seascape, painted often by Nolde and others. I never tire of it. Sunlight illumines the clouds, the sea, the dunes, and a stiff breeze bellies Danish flags and whips out Danish pennants in streamers of red and white. Danes fly their flags when they are at home on Fanø. One can tell from a distance whether or not a call on one's neighbor will find him



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in residence. The warmth of one's welcome is, as always, a less determinate thing.

I expect a call from Andreassen, and will give him a warm welcome. He'll get strong coffee and a shot or two of old fashioned Danish bitters. His "cough medicine," he calls it, though I've never seen him cough. He's my age. At seventy-five (he's told me), he is hale and strong, always up for a walk on the beach and a good cold schnapps afterwards.

So my flag is up, though it feels strange to me to fly it. Flags are good for decoration, colorful counterpoint to the muted seashore shades of sand and obsidian/green, but the essence of Fanø transcends nationality. Perhaps it is better said that folk of several nationalities have put their stamp on Fanø, and that the island has absorbed these imprints and overlays and remained very much itself. Andreassen and I will walk along the beach today. The dunes are honeycombed with elaborate concrete bunkers built by the Germans in the last war. Though massive, they are not obtrusive. They are sanded over for the most part, but one can crawl in their openings and make one's way through mazes of black compartments. One moves carefully, though; there are cisterns and drop-offs filled with water, that reveal their depths in the interval between the drop of a pebble and its liquid impact.

Fanø is overlaid with such imprints of past occupations. Occupations in several senses of the word, and preoccupations, too. The island holds bird trapping grounds where fowlers in older days snared ducks in huge numbers. There are the marshes where grow the grasses used to thatch the Fanø pitched roofs. And there is the cemetery.

It was my first visit there that shaped my relation with Fanø. Andreassen tells me that it shaped a lot more. It expanded my world view from the scientific, even mechanistic, to something with less determinate boundaries. Andreassen is a scientist, and that part of him does not approve. But he is of Fanø, and that part understands. I can say only that the island imprinted me with a need to return.

Ian died seven years after our post-war holiday. The following year I rented a cottage on Fanø for the summer. The next year I bought one.

"This is not going to be like English tea," I said. Benson Hunt looked at me. "It's better."

I don't think the young American needed much convincing. All around us late afternoon diners were drinking strong coffee and eating *wienerbrød.* Crumbs on linen tablecloths attested to the delicate flakiness of the Danish confections. Very few crumbs remained on plates, no matter the lapses in manners needed to gather them up.

"Why do they call it *wienerbrød?*" Hunt asked, eyeing his before tasting. "These outdo Vienna."


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"Give the Viennese the inspiration if not the execution. But, then, they lack Danish butter."

Hunt nodded. He set down a manila envelope by his plate and shifted his attention back to his pastry. He stopped eyeing and started eating. Between bites I began to learn more about my new friend. He was a post doc in neurophysiology at Stanford. He'd worked under people of some reputation, and had recently obtained a small grant for his own work on enzyme catalysis and neuropeptides. No wonder he had seemed bludgeoned by the coincidence-piled-on-coincidence aspects of our chance meeting. And, though I wouldn't have thought it, he wanted to talk shop.

"I try to keep up, but in your field I'm somewhat out of touch," I protested.

"Yes, but you must know some of what's going on. The field has even broken out into the general public awareness. Candace Pert's discovery of the brain's opiate receptor did that."

"Yes, but that was back in the '70s, when I was still at Oxford. I still recall the furor over Pert's noninclusion in the Lasker Award. That kind of thing focuses one in, even if the science doesn't. And, yes, I remember the science. Pert located the brain's opiate receptor and reasoned that there would be no development of such a receptor without an internally produced natural morphine. And there was one—several—though she wasn't their discoverer."

Hunt nodded approvingly. "She didn't have to be, once she showed the compelling necessity for their existence."

"Well," I said, "that was good science and juicy politicking thereafter. But what of it, at this late date?"

"Nothing of that," Hunt said, filling his coffeecup from the silver pot left at our table. "But I've done something similar. I've found a receptor, but one without an endorphin—or brain hormone of any type, opiate or not—to match it."

I said nothing, but looked interested.

"So I began searching for a compound that would fit that receptor's slot, and didn't find it in the human brain but outside. Then I asked myself—like Pert—why there would be such a receptor without some endogenous substance to link with. I think the problem is in our DNA—some gene that mutated wrong millions of years ago so that it can no longer order up a specific enzyme. But I can produce that enzyme in the lab and turn it loose. It produces a neuropeptide, a brain hormone that we don't have. It does it by cutting up a larger precursor protein to do so, and *that* protein is in our brain. Introduce the enzyme, and the human brain does the rest. Then we have something internally produced that binds to my receptor."

"And what do we get?" I asked. "A natural high?"



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"No. It's not an opiate. The receptor sites are in the temporal lobes but also in the hippocampus. Does that give you a clue?"

"The temporal lobes are believed to be the sites of long-term memories," I said slowly. "And the hippocampus is instrumental in the laying down of them."

"Indeed. And what I got when I tried this on myself were memories." Hunt paused. "Past life memories."

Involuntarily I found myself pushing away from the table, distancing myself from this now laughing, now serious, perhaps mad American. My earlier view of him as a Byronic Romantic may not have been fantastic enough.

But still, post doc at Stanford . . .

"Have you tried this experiment on any animal or person but yourself?"

"Rats and monkeys, first," he said. "But I couldn't detect any behavioral changes. Nor adverse side effects. Of course, I didn't know what I had, though I was beginning to guess."

"Human subjects?"

"Two lab assistants. Similar results, though I hadn't divulged my experiences so as to keep the experiment blind. Results tough to verify, I'll add—bush country existence in some backwater of Africa, nameless using today's referents. A better chance with my second assistant. He's poking around on the Hopi reservation in Arizona. Not so easily done, delving into a proud people's tribal life of the last century when you're not a Hopi this time around."

"Have you published?"

"I've written an article, amended it and sent it off to *Science* today. Here's a copy for you." He handed me the manila envelope, which I took rather gingerly. "That's what the whole gravesite scene was about."

I wasn't getting that, but I was getting something else.

"You could be making an awful fool of yourself," I said. "Because there is another explanation. A likelier one, I think."

"There is," he nodded. "Tell it to me."

"That you've not discovered a retriever of memories of this life or any other, but a powerful hallucinogen that produces singular and specific delusions."

"Exactly," he said. "And that's why I'm on holiday bicycling, touring, delving. I hope to do better than my lab assistants. Because, if you're right, duplicating the experiment with still others might be simply multiplying the delusion, everyone conjuring up his own fanciful custom-made past lives."

"Something at the Fanø cemetery hit home," I said. The waiter came to the table and removed our plates. I signaled for a fresh pot of coffee.

"I can tell you what turn of the century Kiel looks like to a boy," he


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said deliberately. "Going down to the harbor with my mates and crawling hand over hand over the mooring hawsers of barges and sailing ships, working around the rat guards, instead of walking up the gangway, just to see if it could be done. Teaching myself to sail in an old dinghy with a homemade mast stepped in it, the sail cut out of a discard from a three master that had beaten around the Cape. Another kind of sailing—in the Kaiser's uniform. Stiff, muscle-locking bridge watches. Relaxing after evening meal in the lee of the *Lützow*'s after turret, sighting a red sunset down the length of those twelve inch guns. Standing to battle stations in the heat of that same turret. Mingled smells of powder and sweat as we jammed projectiles into the breech. The eardrum burst of that nearby hit, a jagged hole blown into the turret's side and one in my own, the water torrenting in harder than any headway you could make out, till the water filled the lungs and washed away pain and the last tendrils of consciousness."

"Hellmut Schmidt," I said.

"I could have recited that name and recalled that life and death a year ago. In California. But no one would have believed me, and I wasn't sure—then—that I could believe myself." He paused. "I've spent a week walking the Kiel waterfront. But too much has changed. Two wars, one of which I saw half of, one of which I never saw. And worse, the depredations of 'progress.' All I came away with were vague resonances, perhaps self-induced."

"Naval archives?"

"Not much survived of young harbor rats and drafted seamen. And Schmidt is a common name in the German navy." He smiled. "About as common as Nielsen in King Christian's."

The waiter brought the coffee, setting the pot between us. I could see my distorted reflection in its curvilinear surface, as bizarre and away from conventional reality as this young American's story.

"But Fanø was quite different," Hunt went on. "Standing before Schmidt's gravemarker I felt a pull, a reuniting pressure as with a lost twin. An oceanic feeling, though I'm almost afraid to speculate on precisely what that ocean may be. And I won't, till I know more about Fanø."

"I'll help if I can," I said. "But I'm not an islander nor even a Dane. You need to talk to my friend Andreassen, though I doubt you'll find him a believer. I'm not sure I am. Yet."

"Read my journal article," he said, gesturing to the manila envelope now on my side of the table. "Evaluate the science. I know I'm asking a lot of you. I wish I could offer something positive in return."

"It's not a lot," I said. "And perhaps—if you get me to believe—you can."

* * *



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Andreassen is drinking his bitters. I enjoy looking at his seamed and weathered face; he doesn't seem to mind. Wind and salt have shaped that face. Not the wind and salt of voyages around the Cape, but of a lifetime of small boat racing. The sun beats just as hard and the tiller is closer to the salt than in the wheelhouse of a modern freighter.

I sip my coffee. Time on Fanø sometimes seems the intervals between coffees or schnapps. After our beach walk we shall be ready for both. I have adapted well to Fanø customs, Andreassen tells me.

I pull on my windbreaker. Andreassen has never taken his off. On Fanø that is not a discourtesy. I close the door behind us, and we start over the path and the dunes towards the shoreline. There is plenty of activity. Vacationers are bicycling home from Nordby with their morning milk and bakery goods. The children of the German family next door are out playing a pickup game of soccer. Their cries mingle with those of the gulls and the terns.

We pass several of the old bunkers, overgrown with marram grass and sanded over. Then we are past the last dune and out on the flat hard-packed beach. It is a long walk still down to water level. The beach goes out to sea in a long, almost imperceptible declivity. And then the sandbar continues. I have a watercolor in my cottage of wheeled horse-drawn changing huts hauled offshore so that bathers did not have to walk so far through shallows to get to swimmable depths. When one wanted to go back, one raised a small Danish flag, and the teamster would come back with his horse to fetch you. People are more vigorous now, or at least less modest.

We are at the waterline now, looking out to sea. I glance not only out but down. I collect amber, and one can find wonderful pieces of it after a storm if one is early and sharp-eyed enough. Some I keep unpolished in a jar. I have had a couple of pieces polished and set in unadorned silver settings by a smith in Nordby.

Andreassen will seldom initiate a conversation, so I start one. I ask him if he has ever walked the length of Fanø, some sixteen to eighteen kilometers, I would judge.

Yes, he tells me, when he was a boy. Not on the beach, though that is possible to do, but on the road that bisects the island from north to south. The family summered in Sønderho at the southern tip of the island. Andreassen's father would take the ferry from the mainland at the end of his work week, and Andreassen would walk that road to Nordby to meet him. They would walk back to Sønderho together.

We walk on a ways in silence. The scene seems timeless, and I comment on that. I tell Andreassen of my metaphor of Fanø as a palimpsest on which many people of many nations and times have written, one over the other. He has heard all this before.


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I tell him of yesterday's visit to the cemetery and my Nordby meeting with Benson Hunt. That he has not heard.

Andreassen is willing to read Hunt's paper and to meet with him, but he is skeptical. He is always uneasy about visits across the border of science and metaphysics, and insists that one keep one's scientific passport current. That one not become a resident alien on that other side. It is how I would want him to be.

"The paper is good science," I tell him.

"But still subject to the interpretation that all he's found is a new hallucinogen."

"Unless one believes the Schmidt tale."

"Nonetheless," Andreassen says, sidestepping this question, "It is not good science unless the experiment is duplicable. With another verification of a real past life."

"Yes," I say. "And I intend to try it."

I tell all this to Andreassen, who strides behind me, his hands behind his back and his head cocked slightly askew. He shows no surprise. He knows me well enough to have seen this coming. We walk on, paralleling a group of fastmoving sandpipers at the water's edge.

"I'd discourage you from this if I could," he says. "You have too few good years ahead to endanger them so."

I laugh, and stand his argument on its head. "Is it less dangerous for a young man like Hunt, who risked fifty years of potentiality to my five or ten?"

Besides, I tell him, I have hope of duplicating Hunt's experience in a way that will validate it. The key, as ever, is Fanø. It has drawn me since my first visit, in a way that defies analysis. Perhaps there is a tropism that we don't understand, cannot explain scientifically. *Yet.* One that also drew Benson Hunt across the border from his ramblings in Kiel. I have a suspicion that this island and its cemetery hold something more for me than my first guess, the long odds resting place of a Hurricane pilot. Generations of seamen, fowlers, farmers also lie there. And their women. I acknowledge their hold on me, though I cannot yet explain it. With Hunt's enzyme producing endogenous hormones in my temporal lobes, perhaps I can. Perhaps I will find more than affinity with one of those long dead Danes. Possibly even identity.

I do know that Fanø is an overlay and a confluence. A confluence of what—the totality of its elements—I am not sure. Of life currents, perhaps, and of place. Of time, too, I have begun to believe.

That coffee, and particularly that schnapps, sound good to me now, and I stop Andreassen. We turn back along the strand, towards my Fanø home.

* * *



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I look across the dining table at my guests—Hunt and Andreassen—and wonder if I can call this a dinner party. Three is a rather small number. But at my age the criterion of what makes a "party" has ever less to do with numbers. It is a matter of festivity, of mood.

There are fresh flowers on the table. Candles flare, reflecting and refracting their animation against copper and through glass. The talk is spirited. I've seen to that, and Hunt, still working off the high of his Fanø discoveries, is full of plans and speculations. Even Andreassen has touchstones that trigger resonances and reminiscences. Hunt encourages these digressions with well-timed inquiries that spur Andreassen to downright volubility.

And well he does this. We are into the warm course now, the shrimp and rémoulade behind us, the flounder half vanished. Fish and rice go well, and my rice has an added infusion, Hunt's catalyst. Intravenous injection would have been so much faster but so much less civilized. This is more like the marijuana poundcake of my forties, my second youth.

Andreassen continues a story, drawn out by Hunt. It's one I've heard, but no matter; Andreassen tells it well. I sit quietly now, and overlaid on the conversational veneer are flashes, fragmentary and elusive. Shard-like, ephemeral, kaleidoscopic. Summer sun on warm straw as I perch quietly by my father, legs splayed against the steep pitch of a Fanø roof, tamping and tying the dried marsh grasses into the mat that will shelter us this winter of my tenth year.

Close rooms and winter hearths. Smells of cinnamon and cardamom. Counterpoint to the windswept drifts halfway up the handblown panes that look out on the streets of Nordby. Drifts too large for a man to shovel. Drifts never too high for a child's pleasure. But large enough, and never turned black by engine exhausts that are some future madman's dream.

Flash and flicker. There is no cohesion to these visions. Nor endurance either. Yet.

Hunt looks over at me sharply. Andreassen stops in midsentence. They approach my chair and lead me out of it, to my small sofa. Andreassen covers me with a goose down comforter. His eyes look at me with concern. And something more.

Time passes. Or so I imagine.

It is still night. Andreassen and Hunt are asleep in their chairs, but when I stir Andreassen rises, as if he has tied a cord from my toe to his finger. Hunt is beside him. Both look down on me.

"Coffee," I say. Andreassen's face widens to a grin. He disappears into the kitchen.

Hunt says nothing, but looks at me expectantly. Most unobtrusively, he turns on his recorder.


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Andreassen is back with a carafe and three cups on a wicker tray. He pours. I sip and look across at the two of them.

I sort through a life's pivot points, its epiphanies and tragedies. It is like breaking the clasp on a string of pearls and watching them roll across the table top, glistening opalescently. I put my finger on one and pick it up, holding it to the candlelight.

"I am Peder Rødgaard," I say. "Twenty-five years old and seaman on the Fanøbrig *Dorane* out of Nordby in this year of 1876. A voyage on which we double Cape Horn twice. The first time—the reach outbound for Valparaiso—is a time of death and fear. Ice and wind. Reefing the sails atop the top-gallant yards, the shrouds iced over and fingers so numb we had to beat them on the sails to make them quicken. Sleet mats our beards and blues our lips so we can only nod acknowledgment of our orders. It is agony to force our fingers to the work, to hold fast to the iced-over rigging. It is hard not to look aft over a shoulder to a Fanø thousands of miles behind. A home we fear we shall never see again.

"Then the shock, the standing up of a ship underway by a rogue wave that sweeps the deck of two men to a grave that will never be marked. And the setting down of a second mate, too bound up in abusing a frozen-legged and slow-moving seaman to mark that sea, and who himself froze when he should have ordered the helm over. He is sent forward to the forecastle and I am made mate in his place.

"When we double the Cape on our return leg I am wearing white duck trousers and command the starboard watch. The men scramble aloft in blackened trousers amongst the rigging that they have newly tarred from the mastheads on down."

I pause to marshal and make sense of these kaleidoscopic impressions.

"A coming of age," Hunt says softly into the silence.

"I am a mate now," I nod. "Never again to ship before the mast. I will be a captain and will die in my bed above the Nordby tobacco shop that I buy with a quarter century's earnings."

The coffee is cold by now. We all want more, but no one wants to get up to make it.

The sky is beginning to lighten. Hunt fidgets. I can guess his inclinations, and he confirms it. He wants to be off to the Historical Society in Nordby to check out old archives, ship's logs, newspapers. No matter that the archivists are still in their beds and would never think of opening up without *their* morning coffee, rolls and *wienerbrød.*

Andreassen rises to make a new pot. Hunt fills the time by interrogating me on tape on verifiable dates, place names, ship sailings, associates of the past century. I answer as best I can, which is pretty well.

When Andreassen comes back, Hunt asks his translating aid for the verification expedition ahead. Andreassen agrees willingly. He is a bet-



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ter, more disinterested aide and witness to this enterprise than am I. But, out of courtesy, Hunt asks me to accompany them. I decline.

It is not yellowed paper and cold print that I want to look at this day. Nor brick and mortar. Certainly not the buildings of Nordby, where tobacco shops have been turned into perfumeries, taverns into tearooms and coffeehouses. Coffeehouses that I had been more than willing to visit just yesterday.

Now there is the cemetery to be visited. I'll lay long odds that I'll find a marker with Peder Rødgaard's name. One day there will be one with mine. Two graves, two lives; both overlays on one surface.

This is something to be considered in solitude, with a beach walk to follow.

Andreassen knows this without being told. He has walked the streets of Nordby and Sønderho with me, and the long beaches between them. He knows where I must spend the day. He knows that towns and buildings are man's constructs, subject to his impulses to "improve" and depredate. When man gives in to these impulses a way of life permutes and disappears. But the sand and the sea do not.

Nor do we, in our entirety. Our receptors to the outside world change and wither and die. The palimpsest that bears the impressions remains. I will walk the beach and look out to an abiding sea with eyes of change and constancy. ●


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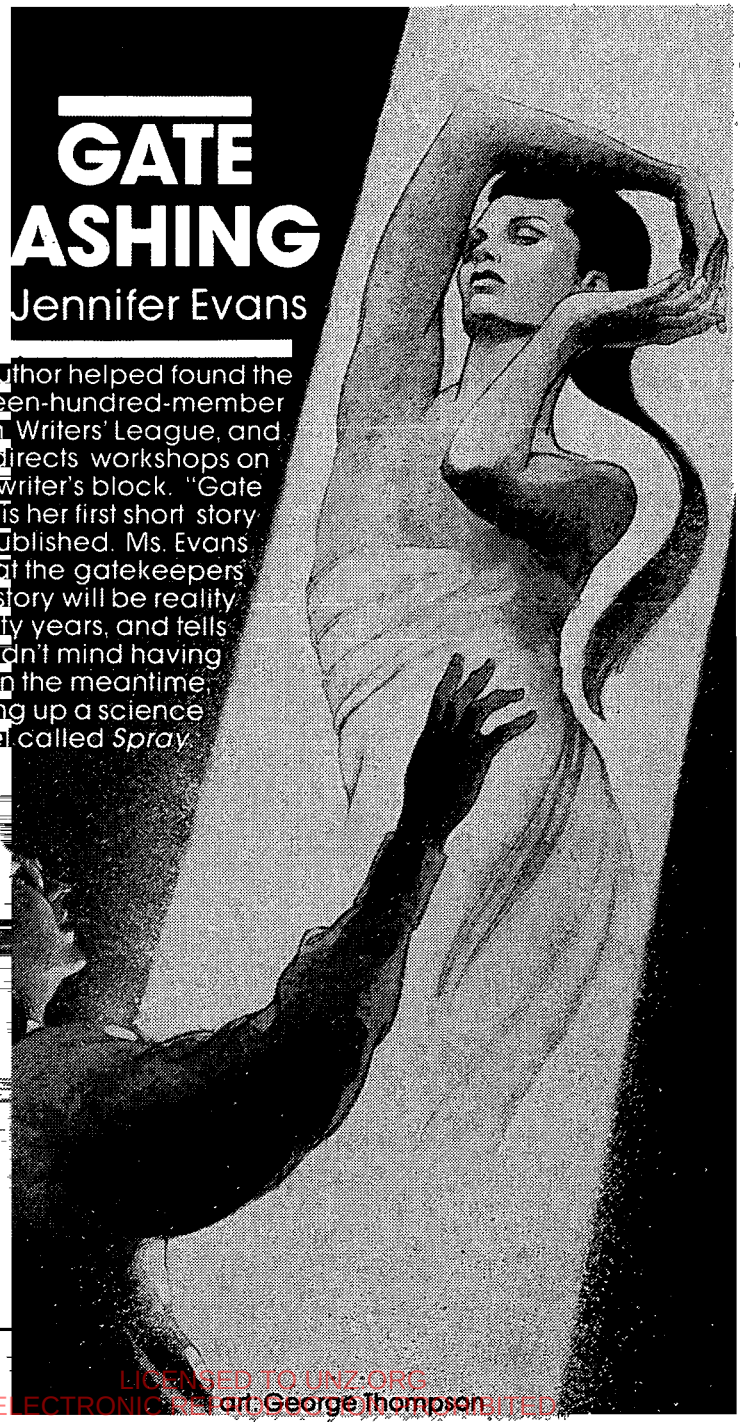
# GATE ASHING

## Jennifer Evans

...he author helped found the ...ourteen-hundred-member ...ustin Writers' League, and ...co-directs workshops on ...ing writer's block. "Gate ...ng" is her first short story ...e published. Ms. Evans ...s that the gatekeepers ...the story will be reality ...wenty years, and tells ...wouldn't mind having ...ow. In the meantime, ...shing up a science ...ovel called *Spray*.



art: George Thompson

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A thick dirty rope dropped from the ceiling of Jackson's livingroom. The knotted tail swung in jerky arcs as a huge warrior descended, then dropped the last four feet. Dust—imaginary dust—billowed from under his black fur boots across Jackson's Persian rug. The warrior wore a black fur hat, a metal loincloth, and a bronze medallion. His sinister eyes gleamed over a hooked beak of a nose. Crouched in a fighter's pose in a perfectly cylindrical shaft of light, he curled his lip as he regarded Jackson.

"You."

Jackson glanced up and yawned. He was sprawled on his sofa, balancing a tray of black coffee, vitamins, and a breakfast stack-meal across his knees. "Slab, ask Silverette to come on the H."

In a thunderous Slavic accent the warrior said, "She refuse to come on the H, Jackson. She say, 'I just got to bed, for God's sake.' " Slab yanked down the heavy rope and squatted to coil it, his oiled shoulder muscles glistening. He winked at Jackson through the fur of his hat.

Jackson said, "Silverette, please come on the H. I hate this gate-keeper program, you know I hate it. He's ogling me again."

Slab rumbled, "She say, 'He ogles everyone,' " and spat imaginary spit on Jackson's carpet.

I bet he does, Jackson thought, remembering last night how he had seen Silverette showing one male guest, then another, the new H light in her bedroom. He wondered whose bouncing bare ass Slab had ogled last night.

"She want to know how you liked her party."

Jackson threw back a vitamin C with a slug of coffee. "This morning there was confetti in my underwear, and I have no idea how it got there. Listen, I'm sorry to call so early, but last night, there was a woman."

Elbowing through the cacophony at Silverette's party, he had been struck by a glimpse of a naked female back robed in white like a statue of Athena; a long, glossy black ponytail; and once, the face of a woman who stared straight at him mesmerized. This morning as he lay in bed waking up, as his mind rolled around like a ball-bearing on a plate, he realized that these glimpses that had so struck him were all of the same woman.

He described the woman to Silverette.

"We know who you mean," said Slab in a few moments. "We don't know her name. She showed up as the guest of some woman who talked gates. Zat's all we know."

Jackson considered. He had always been good on H. "Would you give me the directory codes for all the women you invited who have gates? Woolcott, stand by."

"Very good, sir." The deep genteel voice came from overhead. The black



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surface of the table at Jackson's right flashed, and a list of words and numbers appeared there. "Thanks," Jackson said.

Slab said, "Do you want to know what we heard last night about your modder and fadder, Jackson?"

"Not really." Jackson craned his neck to try to read the screen. "How many are on the list?"

"Twelve. Your modder and fadder just made a million and a half on a big defense project."

Jackson said, "Let me guess. It took them six weeks, they did all the programming at home, and nobody saw their faces."

"Right," said Slab.

So that's why they wouldn't take my call on Christmas Day, Jackson thought. The normal reason. Fifteen years ago the media had crowned Mari and Roanoke Cobb geniuses. In his mind Jackson had always called them the Zombies.

"Closing," said Jackson. With a final wink, Slab leaped straight up in the air. Jackson watched his dirt-encrusted boots vanish into the Holotech transmitter in the ceiling.

For the next three hours, Jackson's gate program, Woolcott, called the women on list, and Jackson adroitly talked his way past gate after gate. Silverette's party guests weren't the kind of women who owned straight gates styled like butlers or secretaries. Jackson waded through a flock of tedious whimsies: four beach boys, three Vikings, two elvises, a cupid, and a python.

Jackson hated the process. What he really hated about it was being expected to chat with an H image as though it were a real person. You didn't dress your German shepherd in trousers and a shirt, sit it across the dinner table, and commence to flirt. In Sweden, marrying a computer had been legal for two years. And they were clamoring for the same laws here. The gate-lover philosophy made him want to puke.

"Last one, Woolcott?" he asked.

"Correct. Her name is Flame O'Reilly."

A red teddy bear appeared out of the air in the center of Jackson's living room. It turned a somersault across the Persian carpet, sat up dizzy, and said with a goofy smile, "Ta-da."

From the sofa Jackson sighed.

"Hi, stranger, I'm Randy," said the bear and smiled up at him hopefully, its red fur glistening. There was an inch of clear space between the teddy bear's rump and the floor.

Trouble and time, said those cute black eyes.

"I'd like to talk to Flame," he told the red teddy bear.

"Would you like to see me turn another somersault?" asked the bear.

"No," said Jackson, too late. The teddy bear somersaulted again, and



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then again. Jackson patiently waited, then repeated, "I want to talk to Flame, right now."

"Aw, but you're a stranger," said the little bear. "We don't know you. Grr-ow," he growled in a mock-fierce way, with his paws on his hips.

Jackson wanted to curse, but didn't. "Please tell Flame I was at Silverette's party last night and I want to speak to her."

Above the Persian carpet, the edge of a beautiful female leg, bare to the hip, flashed by and was gone. Jackson grinned. With luck, that had been Flame walking through the edge of her H light.

He was right. In a moment a distant female voice called from Jackson's speaker. "Hello. I'll be there in just a moment. Play with Randy."

He'd be damned if he'd play with Randy.

"Oh boy, oh boy!" said the bear, dancing. "You want to hear me sing my song?"

"No. No song," said Jackson. "Randy, why don't you take a nap?" 'Take a nap' shut down many recent gate programs.

"Nap? Bears don't like naps."

"Shut off. Silence. Freeze. Stop program."

Randy began to sing, "On the Go-oo-od Ship Lol-li-pop—"

A young woman with a curly thicket of red hair appeared in the middle of Jackson's living room and sat down on the floor. For a second her image overlapped with that of the singing bear, then the computer smoothly adjusted. She was swathed down to her toenails in purple cloth edged in tiny gold coins.

"Hush, Randy," she said. Her rump, too, was an inch off the carpet. Jackson had seen a lot of swathes at the party past night. He thought this one looked like a purple toilet-paper mummy, although somehow the overall effect was feminine.

"Well?" she said, "How do you like him?"

"Who?"

"My teddy bear."

"Oh. Helluva program," said Jackson. "I'm Jackson Cobb."

"He's my baby. This year's update. Four and a half terabytes. I wish I could hug him and hug him, but he won't—I mean the system won't let me. What do you have?"

Another gate-lover, thought Jackson. By now he knew what to say. "Mine is sort of broken right now. I don't want to talk about it."

"You poor guy. I understand," said Flame.

"I'm trying to find a woman who was at Silverette's party. I don't know her name." Jackson described her.

"That's my cousin Fee," Flame said. "Her company just transferred her here. My mom asked me to take her to some parties so she could



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meet people. I go to lots of parties. Randy just whispered in my ear that he likes you very much. He wants you to come over and play with us."

He looked at his hands so she couldn't see him roll his eyes. "That's very nice . . . of Randy. But I want to talk to your cousin Fee."

"Oh gosh," said Flame plaintively. "I hate making decisions like this." She got a manic look in her eyes. "I know—let's let Randy decide."

"No," said Jackson immediately.

"Then let's vote. I vote yes."

"I vote yes," said Randy promptly.

"I vote *no*," said Jackson.

"Oh sorry," Flame said. "Two to one. You lose."

The bear capered. "Yippee doodle! I get to decide for the big people."

Flame posed the question. "Can Jackson have Fee's directory code—yes or no?"

The bear threw its paws wide. "Yes!"

Flame looked aghast. A yellow blip bounced like a tennis ball across the screen on the table beside Jackson's sofa. "Woolcott, accept that—quick," Jackson whispered.

Flame said, "My cousin is . . . she's very strange. I guess you'd call her . . . What's the word? What do you call a person who's sort of . . . thinky? You know, who thinks all the time?"

Jackson could think of lots of terms for a person who thought all the time. In fact, *he* thought all the time. "Smart? Intellectual? Analytical?"

"That's it. Analytical. I don't think Fee believes in romance. She could break your heart, and your poor heart is already broken, isn't it?"

"Oh—over my gate—right," said Jackson. "Well, thanks for the warning. I'll be careful. Closing."

"Randy, where are your manners? Say 'bye," said Flame.

"'Bye." The teddy bear waved his paw.

Flame, Randy, and the H light faded, and the room lights came on. Jackson rolled off the couch onto his knees to read the words in the yellow disk on the screen.

He took a heavy fishing rod down from the mantel and cast it toward the high ceiling a few times, thinking. Jackson went deep-sea fishing every summer, mainly because he empathized with the fish he caught. The feeling of being hooked on a line, of being towed remorselessly toward doom and suffocation—and just for making a lunge at something delicious—this was a feeling he knew. It was how he felt with women. And yet he searched for the perfect woman, frequently found her, and leaped free of the net again and again.

So was he going to call her? Jackson whipped the fishing rod slowly through the air as he thought.

You are infatuated, he thought. Fatuously infatuated. There are third-



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graders more mature than you. He thought about meeting those eyes again, about untying that glossy black ponytail, about tracing the scooped edge of her white garment slowly down her back . . . up . . . slipping it off one shoulder.

She didn't make him feel like a third-grader. A woman like that . . . what would she be like? Like Flame, her cousin? The fishing rod halted, then resumed moving. No, she wasn't anything like Flame. Flame said Fiona was analytical. As Flame understood the term. New in town, not married. Jackson felt nervousness begin to lurch in him. What if something about her spoils it all? What if she turns out to be an absolute bitch, asks to borrow money, or drools into a cup?

What if she's the perfect woman and she hates me?

He realized that if he waited much longer he wouldn't be able to call her. "Woolcott."

Woolcott appeared in the H light. He looked like a Santa Claus in a pinstriped suit.

"Call Fiona Greenough. Send my full listing. Oh—and record this."

Woolcott bowed and dissolved. The room lights dimmed. Jackson sat down again on the sofa, in front of the cylinder of light from the floor to the ceiling, and waited.

In half a minute, the woman of the party appeared. She was seated behind a small wooden desk. Her black hair was pulled back in a sleek ponytail, and, like Flame, she wore purple, but it was a simple, close-fitting sweater with the sleeves pushed up. No gatekeeper. A woman who answered her own H. He liked that. He liked that a lot.

"Hello," said Jackson, "are you Fiona Greenough?"

Quite calm, she said in a warm voice, "Yes. Hello." No recognition of him sparked in her eyes.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Jackson Cobb," he said, even though he had sent his full directory listing and it was undoubtedly right at her elbow on the screen in her desktop. "I was at Silverette's party last night. I talked to your cousin Flame just now, and she gave me your code."

"I see," said Fiona and smiled. The smile was like the sail of a ship unfurling and catching the wind.

Jackson noticed she didn't look down and read about him. Maybe she was just being polite, or, more likely, she had already scanned the whole thing before she came on the H. He said, "I didn't get a chance to meet you at the party. Flame said you just moved here."

"And what else did Flame say?"

"That your company had just transferred you here."

Fiona folded her slim hands on the desk and said, "Oh."

She wasn't making it easy. "Did you enjoy the party?" Jackson asked.



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She looked off-light and fidgeted. "Hard to say. I'm in a bit of a rush right now."

Jackson took a deep breath, damned her, and willed himself not to turn red. "Would you like to go out with me sometime? I plan to ride out to Green Cascades tomorrow night for supper. Want to come?"

Fiona tilted her head. "I'm not sure about my schedule. Let me call you back a little later."

"Okay," said Jackson, puzzled.

"It was nice to meet you, Jackson." Fiona stood up and smiled. Jackson's heart churned. "Goodbye," she said and touch-screened out.

"But—" he said. The desk and the woman vanished, and the room lights came back on. He stared at where she had been. "Woolcott, rerun that conversation."

In a second, Fiona's image returned. Jackson walked behind the H image as it replayed, examining Fiona from behind, listening to her pleasant sexy voice and his own. Fiona wore white shorts and sat in a white swivel chair. Nice legs, he noticed.

She didn't seem to remember him at all from last night. Had she really been in a hurry? Had he scared her? What had she really meant about her schedule?

Maybe she was just being cautious—and wanted to check up on him with Silverette before committing herself. She had smiled at him warmly.

That was it, he decided. She loves me.

The Zombies didn't care if their son went to grade school. Jackson graduated from MIT. The floor of the Zombies' huge apartment was covered with a rubble of cellulose foam cups, obscure computer bulletins, and dead roaches. The floor of Jackson's tiny house was covered in immaculate Persian rugs. The Zombies never knew what the Antarctic War was about. Jackson had been there. The Zombies believed you didn't need people. Jackson believed you didn't need the people who raised you.

The Zombies would normally spend a beautiful Saturday afternoon like this one holed up indoors. Jackson spent the afternoon the same way and hated it.

Toward four, he dozed on the sofa, after instructing Woolcott to wake him when Fiona Greenough called.

Woolcott's ringing Shakespearean bellow jarred him awake. "SIR. WAKE UP. YOU HAVE TWO MESSAGES." The program never let him nap more than an hour. Its alarm clock programming was merciless and impossible to override. He knew. He had set it that way.

Jackson sat up and yawned. "Okay, okay, what are the messages?"

"They're from strangers. One has an emergency, and the other has the opportunity of a lifetime."



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"Trash 'em. Did Fiona call?"

"No, sir."

"Wait—play those messages." The emergency turned out to be a forty-five-year-old saleswoman in a bikini selling water furniture; the opportunity of a lifetime was sardine farm futures, offered by a pair of earnest Norwegians.

Jackson slumped on the sofa. "Why didn't she call?"

"Hard to say, sir," said Woolcott.

The sun set. No one called. Knowing it was the wrong thing to do, he called her back.

Fiona's empty desk coalesced in Jackson's living room, then Fiona slipped into the seat behind it.

"Hi," said Jackson.

"Hello, Jackson," said Fiona. That same glad-to-see-him smile. "How are you?"

"Fine."

A silence fell.

"Well, why have you called?" Fiona asked.

It was embarrassingly obvious to Jackson why he had called. "I wondered if you had found out any more about your schedule tonight."

"No, not yet," said Fiona and smiled. "I'm still a bit frantic. I apologize."

She looked calm and not the least bit frantic to Jackson.

"Oh, I understand," said Jackson. "Maybe you could tell me when you'll know."

"It's hard to say," responded Fiona, and she fidgeted.

Jackson heard Woolcott's voice in his head: "Hard to say, sir." That's the kind of thing gates were programmed to say when asked a question they couldn't answer.

She was talking with him like an interactive program would. But she couldn't be a gate. She was too real. A sick feeling came over him; he realized what going on. She was a technosucker, a gate-lover, like her cousin Flame—one of those people who blurred the difference between reality and fantasy. She was pretending to be her own gate. It was worse than drooling into a cup.

"I'm very sorry," said Fiona.

Jackson said, "Well then, would you like to sing me your song? Would you like to dance me your dance? Or could I leave a message with you for the real Fiona Greenough?"

"I don't understand."

"Oh, come off it. I can see what you're doing. You're pretending to be a gate. It's the worst piece of acting I've ever seen."

"You think I'm pretending to be a gate?" she asked.



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Increasingly angry, he said, "Look, the game's over. Just stop it. It's sick." He paused, looked around the room and back at her. "Fiona, can't you talk to me like a real person?"

"What do *you* think?" asked Fiona, like a computer pretending to be interested.

That's it, he thought hatefully. "Fee, why don't you just freeze program?"

Fiona stopped moving.

"Oh, cute." Jackson shook his head. "Fiona."

She didn't blink. She didn't breathe. She just sat there pretending to be frozen. He touch-screened out and sprang up from the couch, furious. He wished he had something to hit. He went in the kitchen and slammed the counter with both fists. He couldn't get the picture out of his head of Fiona sitting there rigid behind her desk. So beautiful, so sick. It turned his stomach.

Guilt began curling the edges of his fury. What if she really were crazy? How long would she stay in that position, with her big beautiful eyes wide open? He had read once that the Mayans blinded people by sewing their eyes not closed, but open. An image came to him of Fiona sitting on a bed in a mental hospital, her eyes milky white and staring. Damn her.

About ten minutes had passed. Queasy at what he might see, he called back.

Fiona appeared in the H spotlight. She sat behind the wood desk and stared over his left shoulder, exactly as his command had frozen her.

I've made her a catatonic, he thought. No. Maybe it's a trick. Maybe it's a still image. But she froze. I saw her freeze. Hesitantly, he said, "Fiona? It's Jackson. Fiona, wake up."

Fiona did not respond. He swallowed and said, "Fiona, unfreeze program." Nothing happened. He tried in his mind to reconstruct what he had said before so carelessly, and tried again. "Fiona, why don't you just unfreeze program?" It didn't work.

He tried every restart command he could think of. "Fiona, unfreeze. Fiona, go. Fiona, begin." What were the other ones he had heard? "Fiona, on. Fiona, restart. Fiona, wake up."

He slung a green sofa pillow through her head. It hit the mantel and fell to the floor. "Fiona, give me a break. Goddammit, you are trouble," he roared. "I'm not going to be sucked into this." Fiona continued staring over his shoulder.

Jackson jabbed a finger at her. "If you were *logical*, 'unfreeze program' would work. That's the logical pair, 'freeze program,' 'unfreeze program.' But you aren't logical, Fiona, and you know why? Because you *aren't* a *goddamn computer*!" He stood up, stalked around, and rubbed his face.



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"Your eyeballs are going to start to peel like pearl onions. If you don't wake up right now, I'm going to call Flame, and the police, and the EMS, and we're going to cart Cousin Fee off to the funny farm."

Cousin Fee, he thought—*Fee—Fee*—that was it. Flame had called her that.

"Fee, unfreeze program," he shouted.

There was a microsecond of white static in the H image, and Fiona broke out of stillness. She smiled, glanced around with warmth and tranquility, and said, "Hello. Is it Jackson? I can't see you."

There was no gasp, not a single blink. Just the static and she was on again.

My God, you really are a program, he thought. Just like I thought at first. I've been trying to save a program. A fucking program. I can't believe it. It's not a woman who pretends to be a gate, it's a gate who pretends to be a woman.

The pieces all fit into place. Her not recognizing him. Her lack of concentration. Her excuses about her schedule. And that bit about being in a hurry. She pulled that whenever he asked the kind of question a gate couldn't answer. It was all a ruse to take a message and get off the H before he could figure out he was talking to a computer.

"Is anyone there?" Fiona asked politely.

Jackson moved to the spot behind the sofa that put him on H and said, "Sorry to waste your time. I want to speak to the other Fiona."

She looked quizzical. "Hmm . . . the other Fiona?"

"Right," said Jackson. "Let me speak to her now."

"I guess I'm not quite following you."

She had infinite ways to say she didn't understand, he thought. Again he said, "I want to speak to Fiona."

"I'm Fiona."

"No you're not."

"Hmm. Jackson, could we talk a little later?"

"Look, you piece of trash, you've put me through hell. Tell Fiona I want to speak to her. Tell her now."

"Oops, look at the time."

The program was about to cut him off. There was no time. He blurted the only thing he could think of, the salesman's foot-in-the-door, the words that were guaranteed never to work with a gate:

"This is an emergency."

"An emergency?" Fee's eyes widened. "Wait a second. I'll be back as soon as I can." She sprang out of the H spot. The white chair rolled out of sight. Jackson sat down on the sofa and waited.

After a minute or so, he saw the desk shimmer slightly. His eyes narrowed. Fiona gracefully slipped into view, bringing the white chair


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with her, and sat down in it at the desk. She was wearing the same purple sweater, but it was slightly awry. Her eyelids were puffy and her ponytail was tangled. Jackson noticed her blink when she saw him—she recognized him from the party, he knew, but he no longer cared.

"What's the emergency, uh, Jackson?" she asked, half-angry and half-afraid.

"Why did you jump up and run off like that?" he asked, his voice innocent.

"Oh, I was—I smelled something burning in the kitchen. It's all right now. What's the matter?"

"Out late last night?"

She touched her tangled black hair and paused a long moment. "You guessed."

"Yes," said Jackson.

Fiona didn't seem upset or contrite. "How did you get on this line anyway? Nobody has my code."

"Flame does."

"Oh." She thought about that.

"Very fancy machine," Jackson commented. "It made a fool out of me." He wondered where she had gotten such a program.

"I'm sorry, but that's what it's supposed to do—only you're not supposed to know it," Fee said with a small grin. "How did you guess it was a gate?"

Jackson folded his arms and looked at her.

"I'm really curious. I need to know." She raised her eyebrows and said, "*Pleeeease*? Isn't it an amazing gate? Let me bring her on H with me."

"Is that what gate-lovers like to do, have tea parties and pet each other's gates? Not me. Goodbye."

Fiona frowned at him as she evaporated and his living room lights came back on. Jackson went to the kitchen, pulled a stack-meal from the refrigerator, stuck it in the micro, and stood there staring as the micro came on automatically. The chime broke his thoughts.

"Fiona Greenough on the H," said Woolcott from the refrigerator.

"No room sound. You talk to her. She'll like you," Jackson said. Nevertheless, he drifted to the doorway of the kitchen where he could see the H light.

Fiona was sitting crosslegged on top of her little desk. She bit her lip. "Jackson, I know you're there. My gate recorded you. I just played your calls."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cobb is very busy just now," said Woolcott, unseen to Jackson. "Do you care to leave a message?"

"Jackson? Please come on the H. I want to apologize for what hap-



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pened," said Fiona. "You did a very kind thing when you thought I was—well—nuts. I'm sorry about that. I remember you from the party."

Jackson said, "Woolcott, ask her where the gate came from."

"Where did the gate come from, Miss?" asked Woolcott.

Fiona looked down at Woolcott for a second and said, "From work. I'm a gate-hacker. I know you're there, Jackson Cobb. Three-eight-oh-eight-ivory. Now I can hear you. Talk to me."

"You can hear me?" Jackson asked, startled.

"Yep."

"What have you done to my computer?"

"None of your business."

"I don't think I want to talk to any more gate-lovers today."

"Gate-lover? Come on. No hacker on the face of the earth is a gate-lover," said Fiona. Jackson knew she was right.

"This is a new kind of gate, and it's going to revolutionize the biz," Fiona said. "It learns your voice and gestures by watching you on H a while, it creates a large integrated menu of personal algorithms, and then it can *be* you. The lip synch is perfect. That's all I can say."

"That's all I want to hear. Closing," said Jackson.

The H light went down and the room lights came up. A tiny faint voice said, "Seven-oh-nine-five-yellow." Almost instantly the cylinder of H light returned to its place before the mantel.

"You can't hang up on a hacker, you know," Fiona remarked, her voice back to normal.

He crossed his arms. "How the hell did you do that?"

"Gates do lots of things consumers don't know about." She clasped her hands around her knees. "Anyway, last night I was out late."

"I know," said Jackson.

"I know you know. Sit on your sofa where I can see you. I got up early this morning to work on the gate, and I fell asleep after lunch. I was asleep when you must have called. So the gate talked to you. It did fine, really."

"It's a piece of nouveau shit. Look how it froze up."

Fiona sniffed. "That was just a training wheel kind of thing. Easy to fix. It fooled you completely till it froze, didn't it?"

"It's—it's—deceptive."

"Of course it's deceptive. It's deceptive, dishonest, and insincere. It's a great big extravagant technological toy. People are going to be crazy about it."

"And what about when I said there was an emergency? It actually believed me."

Fiona said, "It believed you had an emergency because the voice anal-



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ysis component read your voice. It's a great safety feature. I can show you the analytical summary. You *were* desperate."

"I was not desperate," said Jackson. "I was vehement. I was forceful . . . I was berserk."

"You don't like gates, do you?"

"A gate is a computer in a clown suit. I've hated computers, all computers, since I was three," said Jackson.

"Then why not put them in clown suits?"

"Computers take people over. They can do it like the gates, or . . . other ways."

Fiona said thoughtfully, "Computers only take over people who really want to be taken over. I don't see why you hate them."

"My mom and dad are hackers, and—"

"Oh my God. You last name is Cobb?"

"Yeah. My parents—"

"Your parents are the Cobbs? Mari and Roanoke Cobb?" Awe raised Fiona's voice. "You're kidding."

"Right. The legendary Cobbs. They weren't legendary as parents, believe me." An image of Roanoke flashed in his mind, just his hunched shoulders silhouetted against his screen. Jackson knew that outline better than his father's face.

Fiona leaned forward, squawked in mirth, and said, "I've been spilling my guts to the son of Mari and Roanoke Cobb."

"Are you afraid I'll tell them?"

"Will you?"

"No. We don't get along so good. They'd rather multiplex on co-ax than chitchat with me."

Fiona straightened. "Not great parents, huh?"

"Nope."

"You seem okay."

"I do fine."

"It doesn't matter anyway, about telling them. The announcement is next week."

"Oh."

"I'm glad you wouldn't tell, though." Wistfulness entered Fiona's voice. "You don't like your parents . . . but you don't not like all hackers, do you? Some hackers are okay, aren't they?"

It was a typically hacker way to phrase a question. Jackson smiled. "Some hackers I don't not like, very, very much."

She smiled back. "Good. I'm starved. Let's go eat." ●



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# KINGDOMS

## by S.P. Somtow

S.P. Somtow's latest dark and disturbing tale takes a terrifying look at what it means to be the lord of "Kingdoms in the Sky." The author's new book, *Valentine*, will be released by Tor Books later this year. It is a sequel to his horror novel, *Vampire Junction*.

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# IN THE SKY

art: Bob Walters

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All I ever wanted was an endless summer of thrashing and tagging the L-train and scamming with chicks. Those were the days when I went to public school and my friends didn't know I had money. They didn't know I got picked up by a dude in a uniform in a white limo when I got off at my stop. I'd give anything to have those days back.

On the first day of summer vacation me and my friends were skating along the abandoned sewer. There's this big pipe that we use as a makeshift ramp and we practice our tagging on the walls too plus at night we bring girls over sometimes. On this particular day I'm taking a three-sixty too fast and find myself skidding out of control down the incline. A man in a black suit is waiting for me at the other end. My friends didn't know who it was so they stayed away, thinking, you know, the law maybe.

But I'm all, "Hi, Enzo." Enzo was like our chauffeur.

"We gotta go somewhere, Tony. Your Dad wants you. Right now." He started to take the skateboard from me to put in the trunk. "Good clothes are in the limo."

We drove off. I changed into good clothes. I thought we were going back to the mansion up in Oak Park but instead we were looping alongside the lake, toward the Field Museum. We have our own wing there, the Severini Collection, which is all stuff we brought back from South America. I never thought of it as laundering until I read the article in last week's *Sun-Times*. The one about my dad and the FBI.

So Enzo walks me over to the Collection and there's my Dad. In the first room of our wing there's nothing except one glass case and in it there's a pair of hands—solid gold hands. The caption reads: *Funerary Gloves—Inca—Gift of Rodolfo Severini.* Dad was standing there looking at the hands and his hands were folded just like the golden hands that had been taken off some dead dude, who'd lain in the ground untouched for like five hundred years.

I'm all, "Dad, it's me."

He turned. "Tony." He looked dashing in his Armani suit with his twirled mustache. It was like a hundred degrees outside but he managed to look pretty cool.

"You sent for me?"

"All in good time. Come on, son, let's look at some of these treasures . . . yeah, let's feast our eyes." His own eyes were sad. I could tell that he was trying to hide something. Maybe he was thinking of Mom, who is someone I don't even remember too well anymore.

"Feeling kinda down, huh, Dad. Cares of the business getting to you."

"You can read my mind."

Okay, so it wasn't as much fun as graffitiing a wall, but I could deal with Inca art treasures for one afternoon. Dad put his hand on my shoul-



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der and steered me into the next room. It was full of pottery with geometric designs and statues with staring eyes.

"Look at that one, it's grotesque . . . the bulging eyes, the fat hips . . . " he said.

"Big dick, though," I said.

"Look at that!" It was a row of tapestries—some with abstract patterns, some that showed weird little guys dancing around.

"Look at *that!*" A stream ran through the hallway and there was this model of a sailing ship made from reeds and like these tall wax dudes in flowing robes and hanging earlobes and gigantic headdresses standing around gesturing, and behind it all a wall painting that showed a massive pyramid peering from a mass of foliage, and behind that mountains capped with snow. "They must've added that since last summer."

"Yeah, there's a lot of new stuff," Dad said. He led me down a corridor toward a room I'd never seen before. It was cordoned off, but the guard let us through. A sign read: *huaca—an Inca sacred place—reconstructed environment.*

The place was built to look like a cave with big plaster boulders. The air conditioning was really blasting here and the cold felt good. The floor sloped upward steeply. Here and there, in a niche in the rock, you could see a statuette or a display of gold jewelry.

"Come on," said Dad. He loped uphill, helping me up by the hand. His palm was sweating. We reached a stone staircase—fake stone that is—that led up to an inner cave. It was walled off with plexiglass and light hit it in such a way that you couldn't see inside until your nose was practically rubbing against it. The temperature became noticeably cooler and I was shivering when I got there.

Inside the hollow, seated on a stone plinth, was a dead boy. He was nude. He was cross-legged and his hands were folded on his lap kind of the way the funerary gloves were folded in the antechamber. He was young, my age I guessed. He was perfectly preserved. I mean, I stood there waiting for him to breathe, holding my own breath, until I couldn't hold it anymore and fogged the plexiglass with my gasp.

"Who is he?" I said.

"Human sacrifice," my Dad said. "They left him in a little temple on top of a mountain in the Andes. Offered him to Wiraqocha, creator of the universe, probably. That's how the High Inca kept the empire together—with treaties between himself and all the subsidiary kingdoms, sealed by the mutual exchange of children for sacrifice."

"Weird." I couldn't look away from the dead kid. He was covered in gold: gold armbands, gold neck-chain, gold anklets, gold headdress. There were icicles on the walls. Real ones. I guess they had to try to keep it



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below freezing in there to keep him from going bad. He was good-looking, in spite of his geeky hair with its pageboy bangs.

"Probably," Dad said, "the son of someone important . . . look at how aristocratic he looks . . . he's sitting there and his eyes seem to say, 'Look at me guys, worship me, I'm king of the sky.'"

"Not for me," I said. "I think he's saying more like, 'You assholes . . . I wanted to spend the summer tagging the L-train and scamming chicks . . . and you've made me into a god and I'm bored out of my fucking mind.'"

Dad laughed. "You'd know better than me," he said. "You're the one who's part Inca."

But I didn't really hear him because I was looking into the dead boy's face. I've seen Egyptian mummies but he wasn't like that. He was someone *real*. His lips were parted like he was about to say something. I got the feeling that if I stood there long enough, we were going to start communicating.

Sometimes I would get that feeling with my brother Matt, but it was not intense like that. With Matt, you *knew* that he was never going to speak. But with the dead boy I wasn't sure. It was magical and beautiful and terrifying.

I knew I was never going to forget him.

"Come on, son," Dad said. He turned me around and began to walk me downhill. I got the feeling he wanted to get me out of there as fast as he could. "Pizza at Armand's, huh?"

"Hey, Dad, let me look some more."

"*Basta*. I'm going away tomorrow. There's trouble. The business . . . you know."

"Can I come? I never get to go on your business trips. You always bring back these rad gifts, you tell me stories, but you never take me. I want to see the jungles, the mountains, the cocaine fields, the—"

"You really mean it, son?"

Then all of a sudden my Dad hugs me hard—I'm not used to that—and it's like he's never going to see me again. And there are tears in his eyes but he looks away in the nick of time, he thinks, so I won't see them.

I'm all "Shit, Dad," and then he looked kinda embarrassed so he just said, "The servants have already packed your things."

He started to walk away but I had to run back to steal another glance at the dead boy.

The bad part was that my brother Matt was coming too and that meant bringing his babysitter Lisa, who can only be described as a geek. She was a real doctor, though, which meant she could prescribe anything we needed at the drop of a hat. I don't know how much it costs to buy a



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doctor, but she was always letting us know, in subtle ways, that she could be making more money in some fancy clinic, even though as part of the household staff she never had to do anything except watch TV and write prescriptions.

We got into Lima and were whisked off to a Sheraton in some suburb. It was no different from home except for the funny money. There was a pool, a private jacuzzi in our penthouse suite, a great view of suburban sprawl that might as well have been Schaumburg or Barrington. Dad took meetings all day and the three of us were cooped up in the suite, binging on room service.

Matt was just like me—he had jet-black hair and arched eyebrows and was kind of compact—a year older, but he could have been my twin brother. Except he had never talked. He wasn't a retard and he wasn't deaf. He just didn't speak. Well, to me sometimes, but only in my dreams. Or daydreams.

We were playing monopoly and watching cable and wolfing down *ceviche,* which is sort of Peruvian sushi. In our version of monopoly, I moved all the pieces around, Lisa sat around complaining, and Matt sat around sorting the green and red plastic houses into pretty piles. If this is what visiting an exotic country is like, I was thinking, send me back to the Field Museum.

That's when we were sent for.

"Time to go, Matt." He looked up when I said his name. I helped him get dressed. Lisa came downstairs with us, toting her medicine bag.

Driving through town was the only time we really saw Lima. We saw shantytowns sprouting out of the dirt alongside the highway, cramped and treeless, with bullfight posters flapping on walls of adobe or galvanized iron . . . we inched our way through tiny streets with colonial buildings and hordes of shrieking kids . . . the Plaza de Armas with the cathedral and Pizarro's crypt, thronged with tourists and hustlers swarming over a concrete desert with a few parched oases of greenery. There were even thrashers in the square, riding rings around one of the fountains. But the three of us were sitting in our sealed antiseptic limo and we could see but we couldn't touch, hear, or smell. At last I couldn't stand it any more and I rolled down the window.

It was getting on toward sunset and we began driving toward the sun so I knew we were bound for the shore. It was humid but not stifling the way it can be in summer back home. There was like this dirty fog over everything. The driver told us it was called *guara.* The air smelled like fish and salt and gasoline fumes and used tampax and exotic flowers. The hubbub along the sidewalks was partly Spanish but partly a softer language—Quechua they called it—liquid and rhythmical.

We went through districts called San Isidro and Miraflores. Then the


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limo stopped at a district called Barranco. Kind of a hippie or beatnik place. A steep tree-lined street snaked down toward the sea. The driver pointed. "The Bridge of Sighs," he said proudly. Guitar music poured out of coffee shops and dudes with high cheekbones wrapped in colorful blankets sat around playing wooden flutes—there was even a llama tethered to a gate, so the whole place shrieked *tourist tourist* at us.

A seedy dude tries to attract Matt's attention but I pull him sharply towards us. "Pusher!" I tell him. "You know how Dad hates pushers!"

The driver led us up some stone steps to a room above a coffee shop. The doorway was guarded by stone Incas. It smelled of beer and tobacco. Inside there were old guys sitting around in dark suits. The shades were all down and the room was lit by candlelight. My Dad was there too . . . on a special kind of chair, raised up on a dais . . . he was like a king among these people. God, I was proud of him.

There was an old Indian woman in the shadows. When she saw us she kind of pounced and started covering my face with kisses. I recoiled and she began muttering, *"Antonio, Antonio, ¿no me quieres?"* and then she started to babble in Quechua. She stepped back in a huff, cocked her head to look quizzically at Matt, and then slunk away when she heard my father talking.

"Tony," Dad said, "you're here. I want you to meet Dr. José von Steinberg . . . Alfonso Ortega y Muñoz . . . Gabriel de la Verdad . . . Porfirio Knightley from our Argentine office . . . Captain Buenaventura of the PIP, that's the Peruvian FBI, but he's all right, he's a *compadre* . . . oh, and this is Juanito, Señor Ortega's son—he may be joining us next summer in Chicago."

Then I saw this kid, about my age I guessed, who'd been sitting in the dark corner with the old woman. He got up and held out his hand and walked toward me, stiffly, with the floorboards creaking. He was littler than me. He was a fraidy-cat; I just stared him in the eye and he wouldn't come any closer.

"I am sure you will be getting along superbly," said Señor Ortega, a skeletal man with a cigar. "And you, Tony, you look to be like the perfect *capacocha*. You do us honor."

There was a burst of murmuring at his words. Some people seemed upset. My Dad was trying to look calm. I didn't know what they were talking about, so I didn't answer. But something had come over Matt. He came up real close to me and was squeezing my hand over and over, which meant he was frightened.

Oblivious, Señor Ortega went on: "To have a kingdom here on earth—as your father does—what a splendid thing!—but to have a kingdom in the sky, a kingdom forever—is that not more magnificent still?—is that not what you desire?"


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"No way," I said. "I'm a down-to-earth kinda guy."

For some reason, my words caused an uproar. Only the Indian woman seemed pleased. My Dad turned to them and berated them all in Quechua. That surprised me. I didn't know he could speak it.

At length, Ortega turned to me and said, "I am sorry, *capacocha*. But we are all one *ayllu* here. Our dreams are as one man's dream." He downed a whole glass of *chicha* beer in one gulp.

Something was *really* bothering Matt now. He wouldn't let go of me. He was making gurgling noises. There was stark terror in his eyes. I just knew he was going to shit himself—that was his way of getting our attention.

"Lisa," I said, "you gotta give him something *right now*." She rooted around in her bag for a pill or a hypodermic, and I said, "Dad, what's going on?"

My father said, "We're going on a journey. You wanted to see the cocaine fields? We're going there. But first you have to let Dr. von Steinberg look at you. We want to make sure you're well enough for the trip."

"Come with me, Dad," I said.

So he takes me into an inner room and the PIP man stands at the door curtain with his AK-47. Dr. von Steinberg prods at me and looks at my teeth. Then he measures each one of my fingers with calipers and uses a tape measure to figure out the distance from my wrist to halfway up my forearm. He writes it all down in a book, then he says, "Would you mind undressing now, Tony?"

I don't like the way this is going. I'm starting to panic. I'm all, "Dad, I know you're into a lot of shady shit, but if you're branching out into kiddie porn, I don't want anything to do with it."

Dad smiled a wan smile. "Do what he says, *ragazzino*. It won't hurt."

So I'm all standing in the middle of this room with no clothes on. It's drafty and the room stinks of salt water and chemicals. I'm shivering my butt off.

"You have a mole on your left shoulder," Dr. von Steinberg said. It sounded like an accusation.

"So? Had it for years."

"I will remove it. *Capacocha* must be perfect." He pulls out this big old *device* from like this file cabinet and plugs it in, and it sounds like *dzzzt! dzzzt!* like a Frankenstein machine, and I'm all, "Don't do that! It's gonna hurt!"

Dad nodded. I got the feeling for a moment that he was in too deep. that things were out of control. He wouldn't look at me.

"You will feel nothing," Dr. von Steinberg said, "just a leedle prick. like the bite of an ant—"

"*Yeeoow!*"



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"Is done."

Then Dr. von Steinberg fell to his knees in front of me—a shivering stark naked eighth grader from Illinois—and he's all, "You are without blemish. Thank you for coming to us. Without you we are nothing."

I look up and the dude from the PIP is on his knees too. There's just me and my Dad standing and he won't look into my eyes.

They didn't give me my old clothes back, but threw a cloak over me. It smelled of old sweat and weird spices and it was all embroidered like those tapestries at the Field. It was fastened with a solid gold brooch. I kept saying, "What's going on?" but no one would say anything. It was almost like they were afraid of me, of my power.

We went into the main room and they were all applauding, except the old Indian woman who had Juanito in her arms and was rocking him and singing in a cracked voice. Matt was out cold on a bench. Lisa must have OD'd him.

Juanito comes up to me. He's holding out a gift. It's a Game Boy and some cartridges. He whispers something in Quechua with his eyes downcast. Then, one by one, they're all piling up gifts on the floor. Bundles of 10,000 *inti* banknotes, a portable television, a battered box of Hydrox cookies—

I stood like a dummy, trying to smile.

"Well," said Dad, "better get the show on the road, I guess."

Silently we filed out and went downstairs. A convoy of limousines were waiting for us. I followed my Dad into an even bigger limo than the one we'd come in. Lisa had to carry Matt. The PIP man came with us. He sat at attention, clutching his AK-47.

There was no one in the streets. There's a curfew in Lima. The police were setting up a roadblock just ahead of us. "How can we go anywhere, Dad?" I said.

"It's okay, *ragazzino,* we own these police and they've given us all *salvos conductos.*"

We pulled away. It was night. We turned south, down the Pan-American Highway. We drove fast. I was happy to have the new Game Boy and got engrossed in a Mario Brothers game. I didn't know where we were going but I was glad to get out of that smoky place. Our limo was out front and I could see the lights of the others when I peered out the back window. We were the only people on the coastal desert road.

After a while I noticed my Dad looking at me funny, like he didn't want me to know he was looking at me. I stopped the game even though it was a level I'd never reached before. On the right was the sea and on the left were distant snowy peaks lit up by moonlight. Here and there a shack stood by the road. The PIP man was all rigid, ready to fire. I guess he was like our bodyguard.



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I'm all, "Dad, those friends of yours . . . I don't know. That Ortega dude gives me the creeps."

"Go easy on him son, he's your *padrino,* you know."

"My godfather? Him?"

"And one of the richest men in South America."

"And who's the old woman?"

"You'll find out." He fiddled with some controls and the TV came on. It was an episode of "I Love Lucy" dubbed in Spanish. Then he helped himself to a champagne. He was more depressed than I'd ever seen him.

"So how bad can it be?" I said. "Maybe those Shining Path guerilla dudes have taken over a few fields, maybe the Americans are trying to buy them off, but . . . you still got us, me and Matt . . . always, Dad."

"Are you feeling hyper? You want Lisa to give you a Valium?"

"No, Dad."

My nose to the window, I'm all watching the road unreel . . . mountains and more mountains to the east . . . now and then a bus roaring past, garishly decorated, with people hanging out of the windows . . . a lone peasant on horseback leading a couple of llamas . . . a flock of sheep . . . and everywhere the silvery moonlight, making the foliage glow like polished onyx . . . I'm all hypnotized by the limo's smooth motion and Matt's shallow breathing and the sound of Lisa's voice as she and Dad talk about boring things like the drug war and the economic indicators and the plane schedule. I don't need a Valium to put me to sleep. . . .

I know I'm dreaming when I hear Matt talking to me. Matt's standing beside me in the Field Museum in the room with the dead boy and we both have our noses pressed against the plexiglass. But the cave's all huge now and you can hear the wind screaming outside.

Matt's saying, "You want to go in there? You want to be king of the sky?"

Okay, so the glass starts to dissolve and becomes this fine mist and suddenly we're through. At first I think the dead boy's going to come to life . . . I'm afraid of that . . . afraid it's going to be one of those horror movie kind of dreams . . . and I'll wake up sweating. But no. He's dead and he never moves.

I see the old Indian woman scurrying into the shadows.

"Who is she, Matt?" I say.

"You know," he says. I put out my hand and touch the dead boy. He's cold and dry. I feel the warmth siphon out of my fingers. "Is he dead, Tony?" Matt says. "Is he a god or is he just a dead thing on a mountain peak? I have to know, Tony! Otherwise I won't be able to make up my mind. . . "

"About what?" The wind whistles.



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"I'm scared, Tony," Matt says. I turn to him. His lips don't move when he talks, of course—I can only hear him inside my head—but I can see from his eyes that he's never been so scared in his life. "People out there think, just because I can't talk, I don't know what's going on. But I know even better than you do sometimes, little brother. Don't let them do it to me—"

"No one's gonna do anything to you, Matt . . . it's okay . . . like I'm here, Matt, I'm *here.*"

But I get the feeling he doesn't believe me. That's why I start shaking him and he rattles like a jumble of bones in a knapsack and he turns to dust that slips through my fingers and the dead boy smiles and slowly, slowly, slowly cranes his neck with a *crick-crick-crick* ratcheting straight out of *The Exorcist.*

And then I hear this thundering and I know we're in the middle of an avalanche and the cavern's going to collapse on itself and as I try to run away the plexiglass condenses out of the mist and I'm banging my head against it, *bang bang bang*

*bang* against the window of the limousine.

We weren't on the highway anymore, that was for sure. I woke up all at once. The limousines were bumping and lurching. Gravel pelted us. The Andes loomed ahead, impossibly huge. There was jungle on either side of us. Banana trees. Orchids. Even with the air conditioning you could feel the moisture in the air, heavy with the fragrance of ripe mangoes and rotting vegetation. Peru will do that to you. Blink once and you've gone from temperate to tropical.

"Better pull yourself together, son," Dad says. "It's Sunday. Can't miss mass. Lisa, get out some decent clothes for Tony."

And just like that we're coming out of the jungle into a broad clearing at the foot of a mountain. The top is in the clouds and all snowy but down below we're drenched in sunlight. The lower part of the mountain's like one giant green staircase. The terraces were carved into the hillside 2,500 years ago, Dad says, and they've always been used for coca growing. "And look up there." Coiling halfway up the mountain like a slinky is a narrow road. "That's where we'll be spending the night. There's a small village up there that I own."

We hurtled uphill on the stony road. The driver didn't slow down when we reached the hairpin curves and Matt swayed this way and that. It was hard to get changed with all the wild careening. My stomach was in knots and Lisa kept screaming. I could tell that Dad was getting impatient with her. Finally we screeched to a halt. We were on a terrace. The coca plantations zigzagged all the way down to the sea of jungle. There was a road of interlocking stones, straight as an arrow, threading



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down the mountain from where we stood, but it wasn't wide enough for the limousines.

I looked at Dad questioningly. *"El Camino Real,"* he said, "the Royal Road of the High Incas." We got out of the limo. The others were climbing out too. I saw the old woman. Dr. von Steinberg was fanning himself and Señor Ortega was striding around with his kid skulking behind. Even though the sun was beating down on us it was chilly and hard to breathe because of the altitude.

There was music being played on *rondador* and *quena* and *pincilla*—our chauffeur explained all the different kinds of flutes to us, and a *yaraví* singer squawking away in Quechua with his big hat bobbing in the wind.

On one side of the terrace stood a rococo church with twisting stone columns and gargoyles. Bells were ringing. There were market stalls thrown up with wooden crosspieces and awnings of clear blue plastic. In some of the stalls there were big vats of coca leaves which were being steeped in benzine to release the cocaine. The benzine really stank up the air. It got inside all the other smells, the mutton grilling in garlic and lemon, the heaps of fruit, the llama shit steaming in the cold.

Then there were like these men in gray sheepskin robes wearing headdresses with red feathers—about ten of them—standing in a circle and walking slowly around to the beat of a drum. Matt stopped to stare at them and Señor Ortega was all, "They're rehearsing for *Inti Raymi,* the Sun Festival."

There were also like these guys sitting around a big wooden vat, and they were chewing on sheaves of grain and spitting them out into the vat. The PIP guy told me, with a chuckle, "Oh, they making *chicha*—Inca beer—very strong."

So we trooped into the church and we stood in the antechapel during the elevation of the host. There were these old guys squatting on rugs selling miniature cars and television sets and appliances and houses—you could fit two or three of them in the palm of your hand—all made of sugar. They were taking money right there in the antechapel. Clouds of incense were everywhere, almost choking you, but underneath it all there was still the stench of benzine.

When the PIP man comes in with his weapon slung over his shoulder people move aside. There's a bunch of dudes in a different uniform and they look at him nervously until he flashes a thumbs-up sign to them. I figure they're members of the Shining Path, which is a guerilla militia we sometimes employ to help out in the business.

Señor Ortega comes up to me and puts his arm over my shoulder. "Is there anything you have ever wished for, Antonio? Car, house,"—leering now—"girl friend?" He points to the sugar miniatures. "Anything you want, take." He waves a five hundred *inti*-note at the peasant. I kneel



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down and I select a bunch of stuff—a Porsche, a blonde woman in a bikini—and I get a couple of things for Matt. Matt tries to eat one of them but Señor Ortega stops him. He tells me and Matt to follow him. Juanito shows up behind us and he has his hands full—little TV sets, a couple of houses, sheep, a Mercedes and a Ferrari.

We genuflect as we go into the nave and then he leads us to a side chapel that's twice as crowded as the chapel, plus there's a long line to get in. Women are muttering and crossing themselves and rocking. When we finally reach the altar railing there's a smell like caramel and I see that the people in front of me are tossing their sugar goodies into a brazier in front of the image of the Virgin.

"Go on, children," says Señor Ortega. "Is for Pacha Mama, mother of the earth. The Pope has made her into Mother Mary, but we know better, no?"

He throws his handful into the flames. I watch them shrivel and melt and catch another whiff of caramel. All of his offerings are miniature people. Maybe I'm imagining it but they look like me and Dad and Matt . . . one minute they're there . . . the next they're charred beyond recognition. I'm staring at the Virgin because you know who it looks like? It looks like the old Indian woman only rejuvenated—and when I look into the eyes of the plaster image they glitter and I hear a voice, *mi hijo, mi hijo.*

I'm all, "Who said that?" because I see the old woman out of the corner of my eye and then she's gone. She can slip in and out of dark corners like a jaguar in the heart of the jungle. Jesus, it makes me nervous.

I toss in my offerings. But when I try to help Matt with his, I miss and his sugar dolls clatter against the side of the brazier. I'm all, "Sorry, Matt," and try to cheer him, but he's gone totally glassy-eyed. I guess Lisa must have thorazined him behind my back.

Juanito does his offering, diffidently avoiding my eyes. It's like they all know something that I don't know. Even Matt seems to know.

Later Señor Ortega left us kids in the line to take communion and went off somewhere. Where were Dad and Lisa? They seemed to all have given us the slip. I'm all, *Fuck* this. I looked for Ortega and I saw him whispering with the old Indian woman. I decided to follow them. The incense was so thick it was hard for them to notice me as I crept right up to them.

I hid behind a column. They went through an archway. I waited for a second. There were side chapels along the colonnade. One to Santa Barbara, which was packed with votive candles and Indians on their hands and knees and like all these decapitated human heads they were offering up, *papier mâché* I guess—and I remembered Dad telling me once that Santa Barbara is really Xangó, a hanged god from somewhere



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in Africa. I moved on quickly—it gave me the creeps. I passed some empty chapels with more conventional saints like you'd see in Chicago, but they had no one worshipping them.

The organ was booming away as people were taking the host. But I could hear another music too. Coming from somewhere behind the altar. I followed the colonnade around and the music grew louder. It was a singsongy flute music, Chinese-sounding. There was a stairwell leading downward, I guess into the crypt. The alien music grew louder. My footsteps echoed.

It was freezing down there. I saw marble tombs, the kind that show the body lying in state on top and the rotting skeleton underneath. There were real bones too, arranged in geometric patterns along stone troughs . . . it made me think of death, though I was young. Latin inscriptions everywhere. Flickering candlelight. And hushed voices. I inched my way down. The music welled up.

I hid behind one of the tombs. My head was level with the sculpted skull of some sixteenth century hidalgo with a white worm wriggling out of his socket. The marble was cold and damp. I saw a forest of statuary . . . gods and goddesses, nymphs and shepherds, skeletons and demons . . . a marble Death with a marble scythe . . . among the stone faces there were humans. I saw the old Indian woman. She was naked and spread-eagled against a white sarcophagus. There was a man with his back to me wearing a great embroidered cloak like the one they made me wear in Barranca. He was fucking the woman. Wildly pumping away I mean, and she was thrusting in time to the fluting of three blind musicians. Fucking in church. This wasn't like tagging the L-train, this was a *mortal* sin. Jesus, I was shocked. I didn't know what to do. I crossed myself. Not that I'm religious. This was beyond religion. I crossed myself two more times. "Mother of God," I said.

Other people were watching intently: Dr. von Steinberg . . . Ortega . . . de la Verdad . . . Knightley. Whispering to each other. Nudging and winking.

The man in the cloak pulled away from the woman and turned around and I realized that it was my father.

I crept closer.

The Indian woman's face . . . was it the incense? . . . it was less shriveled somehow . . . she seemed younger.

My father was saying, "I don't want to go through with it."

The old woman said, "You think it is what I want, *mi señor*? I am the giver of life."

My father said, "This is the 1990s, my friends. The world has changed."

"We all have these feelings, *compadre*," said Ortega. "But the world has not changed. Everything is as it always will be, *saecula saeculorum*."



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Then this man in a Shining Path uniform comes charging down the stairs. I duck behind a pillar. He's got a baton with cords dangling from it, and he's bleeding and he has one eye swollen shut. He hands the *quipu* to my father. Dad scans the knotted ropes—I'm amazed he can read them and even more at what he says next: "This is the end," he says. "I can't go on. We can't continue in business without the Panquechochac fields. I'm going to take my kids and go back home . . . maybe even turn myself in. There's only so much *compadrazgo* I can deal with. I'm not like you."

I've never seen him look so defeated. My Dad's not the kind of guy who ever gives up.

"*Ay, mierditas!*" says Ortega.

The Indian woman says, "You are the chosen one. You have ploughed the earth and you must seed the sky. It is time."

At that moment there's an earsplitting crack. Several of the statues crash to the floor. The pillar buckles and Dad sees me.

"Tony!" he screams. "What are you—"

The whole church is shaking: Everyone's screaming all at once. We have to get out. I run for the steps. I don't know if it's an earthquake or what but I think I'm going to piss myself. I don't think about it, I just sprint up those coiling steps, skinning my elbows against the railing. In the nave, people are diving under pews or swarming for the exits. Suddenly I see Matt. He's standing alone, in front of the altar, about to receive communion, only the priest and the altar boys have bolted.

"Matthew!" I shriek at the top of my lungs and I scramble toward him just as the ceiling starts to cave in. I tackle him and we land in the cantoris choir stalls and the flying rubble just misses his head. I look up and I can see the sky through the cracks and I can see helicopter gunships. So it's not an earthquake. It's a fucking *air raid.* And there's a dead woman next to us, sliced in two, sluicing us with gore. I cover Matt's eyes, I bury him under me, I tuck the two of us under the seat and the whole building reverberates and the people's screams are drowned in the roaring . . . "We gotta get outside, Matt . . . come on . . . " The choppers seem fainter now. "We gotta make a run for it."

We scramble out from under the pew. I'm holding a leather bible over our heads. The fan vaulting overhead is shattered and the sunlight streams down. There's a gash in the wall and we dash for it and we find ourselves out there in the plaza where things are going crazy. People are taking cover under market stalls, under oxcarts, behind our limos. People are streaming downhill . . . a ribbon of human flesh twisting and turning across terraces of coca. Benzine vats are burning. A woman is on fire and rolling across the *Camino,* trying to put herself out. Her shriek is like the wail of the Andean flute. I hold onto Matt's hand. He



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stands there stock still like a dead kid with unseeing eyes . . . *fuck* Lisa for doping him up this much, *fuck fuck fuck.*

"Dad!" There he is. At the very edge of the precipice. He's standing there with all his cronies. The Indian woman is there too and she has on a headdress of feathers and she has a cloak over her naked body that flaps in the wind like the plastic awnings in the market stalls like the bloodstained blankets hanging up for sale. "Come on Matt. Come on, Dad's there." I have to tug hard to get him to move. The choppers make another pass and fire leaps rat-tat-tat from stall to stall. I have to drag Matt across piles of brick, across a child's charred body. The Shining Path guys are firing at the sky with their anti-aircraft weapons. There's smoke everywhere. It's in my eyes down my throat and I'm suffocating. But I have to get Matt to safety. I'm exhausted as I reach the edge of the terrace. A herd of alpaca scatters across the paving. The ground never stops shaking.

My Dad looks out over the great green steps toward the distant jungle. The farthest fields are already on fire. Fire is climbing the massive green steps that contain our family's wealth. Black smoke roils across the horizon. The smell of greenwood burning mingles with the porkfat stink of sizzling people. Dad seems so distant from it all and so unreachable.

The Indian woman says: "You see how it must be, Rodolfo Severini. The universe is one of cause and effect. The true forces do not forgive like white men's gods. A bargain was struck in heaven as it was on earth."

My father can't find the words to answer her. It's Señor Ortega who brushes her aside and says, "Do not flagellate him, *bruja!* You enjoy his pain too much. The thing we do is sacred."

"We have celebrated the sacred union of earth and sky, and I have brought forth fruit!" the woman says. "The world must be renewed!" And she begins to weep. Her change of mood is sudden and total.

"I must," Dad says. "I have no choice. This is what I chose. This is the bargain I sealed, twenty years ago."

At last he seemed to see me and Matt. And Juanito too, sniveling as he stepped forward from a cloud of smoke. The church explodes.

"Get ready, kids. We have to go up the mountain."

I looked at the others and saw they were like heaving sighs of relief. This was something they'd all been waiting for and dreading, I guess.

I knew he had come to a terrible decision and he was trying to bury his pain deep inside himself the way a man should. I would have done anything to make the hurt go away, but I knew, when he made up his mind like this, that nothing in the world could change it. The last time I saw his face darken like this was when he had to order a hit on Uncle Eduardo after he narked to the FBI. Eduardo was Dad's favorite brother.



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The battle is still raging when we start up the mountain—me and my Dad and Matt and Lisa and the Ortegas and Dr. von Steinberg and several others. At first the journey is by Land Rover and is not so bad. More hairpin curves, but once you got used to the rhythm, the swing, it was no worse than an upside-down roller coaster, over and over and over.

Halfway again, just before the snow line, the road petered out and there was a *tambo*, a resting spot for messengers of the High Inca. It was a stone hut refurbished for us with a Primus stove and some canned food. There were people waiting for us with about a dozen llamas laden with sacks and mountain-climbing gear. The people were all pureblooded Indians, I think: none of them could speak a word of Spanish. They wore red ponchos and headdresses with feathers and some of them had gold ornaments in their earlobes, like the bolts in Frankenstein's head. Dad greeted them with, *"Napaykullayki!"*

When they saw us they began whispering among themselves and I heard the word *capacocha* many times.

"They've been waiting for thirteen years for this moment, son," my father said.

We stood on a ledge. I peered down over the sheer rock. The mountains around us weren't all jagged like the Rockies but were like curved, like bells or flasks. It was pretty up here and you could barely see the air raid going on, and the choppers were all tiny like dragonflies. It was cold—God was it cold. I was wearing a couple of blankets over my winter clothes and if the air was thin down there in the village here it seemed like a fucking vacuum. My face was all numb and Matt was worse off than me, he was doped to the gills. Even when I closed my eyes and concentrated real hard I couldn't hear him inside my head like I usually can, and even if there'd been a still small voice there it would've been slaughtered by the way the wind was screeching and roaring.

I'm all standing there with Dad and I try to outshout the wind: "Dad," I'm all, "Dad, what are you into here? What kind of bargain did you make with these dudes? . . . What were you doing to that woman in church, I mean like, we *are* Catholic, aren't we?"

Dad says: "It's all the same religion underneath, son." And then he says, "I love you."

"I love you too, Dad . . . but I don't understand."

"Have you ever dreamed of being a king of the sky, lord of the wind, dreamer of the world's dreams?"

"No, Dad."

I realized that this was the question Ortega had asked me before. The question Matt asked me in my dream. It made me scared. I didn't know



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why but I wanted to just run off that mountain and leap back into my bed in Chicago and wake up and tell myself it was all inside my head.

We went back to the stone hut. We spread our sleeping bags out on a granite floor piled high with rugs. Sometimes you could still hear the choppers. The wind shrilled and I tossed and turned and dreamed about the dead kid sitting in his plastic *huaca* in Chicago. Matt didn't appear to me that night. I think the part of him that comes to me in dreams had shriveled up and collapsed in on itself. Because of the cold. Jesus, the cold.

I lay there and played Tetris on my Game Boy by flashlight. Everyone else slept soundly. But Dad sat up all night, I think. On a big old throne hewn out of rock. The Indians called it an *unsu*, a seat of the gods.

Climbing the mountain: after a while you forget there's a whole world outside the domain of the *apu*, the mountain spirit. There's the cold of course. It's a seeping cold. You think you've gone numb and you can't feel anything on your skin but that's when it's already gone all the way into your bones and every inch is agony. You wonder how anyone could ever have done this before. But you know it's been done because every step of the way is clearly marked. There are steps beneath the ice, chiseled from naked rock, and here and there markers and petroglyphs with leering faces peering from the snow. Your feet are blocks of ice and you just go on trudging, trudging, taking the pain. There's snow on everything. On top of the llamas' packs. I'm wearing three alpaca sweaters under my sheepskin and it doesn't make a dent in the cold. And then there's not being able to breathe. Now and then we stop for oxygen—we're carrying a tank of it on a llama's back—but the Indians never need it, they just go tramping upward to the sky.

And this was the easy part of the slope. We climbed from dawn until sunset. We didn't talk because of the wind. Porfirio Knightley liked to beat the llamas with a cudgel, but it didn't make them move any faster.

There was another *tambo* where we spent another restless night. It was that night that Matt came to me once more in my dreams. We were skating together, side by side, down an endless sewage tunnel. There was graffiti everywhere but like I didn't recognize any of the taggers' names. You could hear the far shriek of the wind beyond, not the windy city's wind but the thin and desolate wind of the Andes. We skated swiftly with our trucks perfectly greased and our knees and hips swaying in perfect time almost like we were one kid alone in the long dark tunnel.

We didn't talk for a long time. I was happy. This was the summer I wanted to have.

"I'm sorry it has to end, Tony," Matt says. "But I'm not afraid anymore."

We skate down the long tunnel toward darkness.



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"What do you mean, Matt?"

We link up, arms across shoulders, as we give ourselves to the rhythm of the skateboard, whoosh, bend, whoosh, bend.

I'm all, "Why does it have to end?"

"You're gonna betray me, Tony. But it's okay. The *ayllu* comes first."

"I don't even know what an *ayllu* is. You've lost me." His fingers, on my shoulders, are cold as steel, and bony, as we go skating to darkness down the long tunnel.

"The *ayllu* is the family. You and me and Dad and our mother . . . and the community . . . and the nation . . . and the earth."

"Our mother?"

And then I hear the voice of the Indian woman, saying *mi hijo, mi hijo*. And I know what it means.

*—mi hijo mi hijo mi hijo—*

And when I wake up I see the Indian woman's face, bending over mine, looking at me in the flickering light of a paraffin lamp. Matt is asleep. He hasn't really woken up since we started up the mountain. And there's Dad, on his *unsu,* draped in crimson blankets. The Indian woman isn't old at all. Her old age was just an optical illusion, I guess. The wind is howling but there's warmth in the stone room, warmth that comes from her. Her face is shining. It's how you always imagine the Blessed Virgin might look when they teach you about the Assumption in catechism. You can almost hear the choir singing far away even though you know it's just the wind.

"Are you my mother?" I ask her.

She says, *"Wawachay, wawachay."* I think it means *my son.* Then she goes into a corner and the light fades and the warmth with it. I go to my Dad, who's sitting on his throne.

"Dad?"

He looks up at me. And he's all old—*old!*—like he's sucked up all the family troubles into himself. So I say to him, "You told me that all religions are like, the same underneath, right? And you made some kind of bargain with these people where you had to boff the old *strega* so the natives would like think you were their king, am I right? And now this thing has gone too far somehow. But what's to stop us from saying *basta* already? Stop the world so we can get off?"

"It's not as simple as it looks, son," Dad says. He's wheezing like an old man. "Listen, I'll tell you a bedtime story. Come here."

I can hardly squeeze onto his lap anymore but I feel that he really needs me to be like a little kid again. So I put my arms around him and I lean my head against his neck. His five o'clock shadow prickles my forehead and I laugh a little, and then he says, "All religions are the same underneath, so I'll tell you a folk tale from Southeast Asia. It's



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about Prince Vessandar, who was the ninth avatar of the god Vishnu. He was a great and powerful prince who ruled over the richest kingdom in the world. But even in this kingdom there was poverty and homelessness. People eating out of trashcans and warming themselves over grates in the middle of winter. Are you listening, Tony?"

"Uh huh." I'm drifting. I can see Matt stir a little in his sleep. I can see the old Inca woman standing with her palms folded, with her blankets billowing around her, bathed in soft light.

"Prince Vessandar vowed to give away everything he had. It didn't matter who came to his door or what they asked for. Finally he became a hermit and he went with his two small sons to live in a dark forest at the foot of the Himalayas.

"One day a wicked man named Chuchok came to the forest. He was greedy. His wife wanted to have slaves, because she was too lazy to do anything around the house. So he went to Vessandar's cave and said, 'I've heard that you're the idiot madman who sits in a cave all day and gives away all his possessions to anyone who asks. I dare you! Give me your children to be my slaves. I will abuse them and I will mistreat them. You have to give them to me or you'll be untrue to your vow.'

"So Prince Vessandar said, 'Take them.' And he sent the children down from the cave."

"What a fuckhead," I said sleepily. "What a terrible father."

My father hugged me tight and he kissed me on the cheek and I tasted something salt. This time I really knew he was weeping. And he said, "No, no, you see, he loved his children more than anything in the world. The story is not meant to teach you not to love your children. But in the moment that he gave them up, he understood that everything in the universe is transient. He was filled with compassion for all living things. In his next life he would return to earth as the Buddha. And you see, the evil Chuchok was punished and the children were rescued, so it all came out all right in the end. I suppose I could have told you the story of Abraham and Isaac, too, but you had that in catechism."

I understood it all then. He had told me all about it that day at the Field Museum. *They left him in a temple on a mountain in the Andes. Offered him to Wiraqocha, creator of the universe. That's how the High Inca kept the empire together—with treaties between himself and all the subsidiary kingdoms, sealed by the mutual exchange of children for sacrifice.* The business was failing. The PIP and probably the Americans were burning down the coca fields. Dr. von Steinberg had examined me and found me to be without blemish. Oh, there was the mole, but he'd burned it off, so how were the gods to know? In the dream, Matt got it all wrong. He didn't have to take a physical—just me, the *capacocha,* the sacrifice.



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"You're going to fucking kill me, Dad," I said. "It's for the good of the *ayllu* and all that shit, but it doesn't make it any easier to take. I mean, Jesus Christ, my own father."

"I tried everything, son," he said.

It is the strangest moment I've ever had in my relationship with my Dad. I feel so fucking close to him I almost don't mind dying. That's how much I understand what he's going through. The Indians being gunned down from the sky, the fields on fire, the church getting blown to kingdom come. Oh Jesus, he's in agony. He feels responsible for it somehow and he thinks my death is the only solution. It's what I was born for. It's my destiny.

My father dries his tears on the alpaca blanket. I don't cry because I can't really grasp it all. It's so cosmic and yet it's as personal as the love we feel for each other, me and him. And so we fall asleep like this, huddled together, secure against the whole world.

Then came the hardest part of the climb. We had to leave the pack animals behind. We crossed a mile-deep ravine on a rope bridge. The world was white. It burned our eyes. Then there were steps, step after slippery step. On the easier stretches they carried us—me and Matt and Dad and Lisa in litters made of woven rushes. Toward the end the footholds were far between and the Indians hauled us up in baskets. I remember dangling, with the wind smashing me against the ice wall over and over, not feeling the pain or the cold.

At the peak of the mountain there was a temple. Staircases led nowhere. There were walls of gigantic interlocking stones half-buried in the snow. There were stone shelters linked by passageways hollowed out of the mountain. Caverns within caverns. We all make for the first shelter. The Indians broke out the *chuñu*—which is like freeze-dried potatoes and gross-tasting—and some guinea pigs and started a fire to roast them in, and a few of them sat around in a circle and passed around a handful of coca leaves. They didn't seem at all fazed by the fact that they were going to kill me.

"Damn *huaqueros* have been here," Señor Ortega said ruefully. There were tools lying around. Someone had tried to pry away stones from the wall. "Damn *huaqueros*, they come here with their foundation grants and their shovels, and they write their dissertations, and they rob us blind."

"They steal away even our gods," said Señor Knightley.

It had been squalling a moment before we reached the summit, but here there was no wind at all. The temple was like in its own space, separate from the rest of the world. Looking out through the chinks in the wall, I could see for miles and miles. I could see mountain upon



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mountain, but our mountain was the king of them all. I could see past the mountains; I could see the jungle and the desert and the sea. I don't know if I really saw all this or if it was just with my inner eye. But I know I felt I was king of it all, like I grasped the cosmos in my hand like a baseball. If I only yawned, the wind would spring from my lips and whirl across the land. If I cried then rain would stream down from the sky and if I laughed the thunder would shake the rooftops of Cuzco and even of Schaumburg and Barrington. For a tiny moment I wanted to be king of the sky.

The grownups all went away to be robed. Me and Matt were left alone in the room. The guinea pigs were searing on hot stones and their smoke swirled around us.

"This is it, brother," I said to him. "No more scamming chicks or tagging the L-train."

Matt looked into my eyes for a long time. For a moment I thought, shit, he's going to speak, I'm drifting into a dream. But no. I was wide awake.

Then they came to take me to the holy place.

It's just like the one at the Field Museum. Except the walls aren't concrete. They're solid stone and caked with ice. The floor is a sheet of ice. Our breath hangs in the air. There is no wind here. There's an utter stillness. You feel you're profaning just by being there. I've never felt like this, not even in confession.

"Damn *huaqueros!*" Señor Ortega says again. And then I see what he means. There is a raised *unsu* dead center in the room. But there's no dead kid and no pile of offerings. Just an empty packet of Winstons and a crumpled can of Budweiser. They've taken everything of value. How could they not feel daunted by the spirit of this place? Jesus, I fucking feel it in my bones, in my soul.

The porters have come in now. They're looking sheepishly at me as they lay down gifts in front of the *unsu*. They're the offerings that were given to me back in Lima: the bundles of ten thousand *inti* notes, the television, baskets of food and jugs of *chicha*, the Game Boy I've been playing with since our road trip started.

"Is that why your fields are being wasted by chopper fire and your people are being driven into poverty and homelessness?" I say. "Is it because someone ripped off your god? Because he's sitting behind a plexiglass window in a museum in downtown Chicago?"

No one will look me in the eye. I've become *huaca,* a sacred thing.

My father stands beside the *unsu* with his robes and feathers and glittering ornaments. He's as old as the whole world. Next to him is the woman, who is Pacha Mama, the earth goddess, who is my mother, who is the Blessed Virgin. Jesus she's beautiful. She's like a painting above



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a church altar. Matt is there too, all bundled up, looking frail and disconsolate. I haven't heard him, not in my dreams, and not in my head, since the dream with the long dark tunnel.

I hear the mountain calling me and I'm thinking how good it will feel to sit up here forever and be king of the sky and ruler of the wind. . . .

Dr. von Steinberg comes into the chamber. He has a silver platter in his hands and on it there are gold funerary gloves. Just my size.

Porfirio Knightley comes in wearing a sun-disk on his head, draped in a red cloak. Lisa comes in with a tray of hypodermic syringes. They're not going to let me feel any pain. I'm going to go out little by little, like a votive candle.

They start to chant in Quechua. Their voices are hypnotic and I feel myself drifting into the land of dreams, I feel myself skating down the tunnel. But I'm alone and the tunnel has no exit. I'm skating, down, down, down. Their voices drone on. There's no heat in the cave but I don't feel cold anymore. They go on chanting by the light of a thousand candles, and now and then they scatter incense that clogs my nostrils and dulls my thoughts. I can feel them taking my clothes away and painting my face and covering me with cold gold ornaments. I can feel their hands in mine as they lead me toward the sacred throne.

My father says to me: "Do you wish to become king of the sky?"

I look up at him. No one sees us gazing in each other's eyes. No one sees the thoughts we exchange. They're all standing with their eyes averted. There's a flash of understanding. I see with total clarity what has to be done. Because we are both kings. Jesus, I think, all this time he's been hoping against hope that I'll be able to read his mind, because the words that must be said can only be said by me.

I say, "You can't sacrifice me against my will. Isn't that why each of you has been asking me if I wish to become king of the sky? If I say *yes* then I say the word of power that sets the whole thing in motion. I have the power to withhold everything. All I have to do is say *no*. And that's what I'm saying. No."

They're all staring at me now. There's shock in their faces. I guess this hasn't happened in five hundred years.

I go on, "There's only one practical solution. If Dad dies, who will be your king? How can a mute person rule an *ayllu* of a thousand *ayllukuna?* You have to sacrifice Matt, not me. It was ordained."

I hate myself for saying this. But I know now why Matt is here. I know why Dad has hauled him along with us all this way. I know Dad loves Matt as much as he loves me. I know I love Matt more than anyone in the world. But I have to give him up. For the sake of the *ayllu*. "Examine him, Dr. von Steinberg," I say. "He doesn't have any blemishes. Not even a mole on the shoulder like the one you scraped away."



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Matt has gone rigid. It's like he already feels the cold steal over him, seep into him, turn him to stone.

"But," my father says, "how do we know that he is willing?"

I close my eyes. I call to him in the kingdom of my dreams. I know he's there, afraid, hiding. I can feel him. In my mind I cry out to him: Matt, say yes, say yes . . . I know he won't say it. I know how scared he is of death. I search for him in the tunnel of darkness but he's smeared himself along the walls among the graffiti so I won't be able to find him. I can feel him resisting me. Inside the freezing boy with the icy eyes there's a boy full of rage who cannot speak, cannot defend himself, and I have to speak for him. And so I lie, with passion in my voice to hide my deception: "He's willing. I've read it in his mind. He wants to become king of the sky and ruler of the wind. He is the real *capacocha*."

And I am the only one who feels the force of his anger. And I am the only one who knows I have betrayed the person who most trusted me.

That is how to be a king.

So they took the gold neckpiece off me and put it around Matt's neck. They fitted him with the funerary gloves and the anklets and the armbands of gold. Matt stood there like a Ken doll, letting them put the vestments on him, letting them lead him to the *unsu*. Lisa pumped him full of morphine and demerol. The offerings were laid at his feet and the Indians prostrated themselves and would not look in his face. And me, I felt the numbness leave me. I felt the cold in my joints and the tears freezing against my cheeks. When I could feel pain again I knew that I wasn't going to die.

They crossed his legs and folded his gold-cased hands into position. And I went up to him to kiss him goodbye. He was already as hard and cold as the mountain granite. But in the moment that my lips brushed his cheek, I saw him look at me with hurt and with total, unconscionable hatred. And then his eyes went dead.

Summer's ending and I'm going into the ninth grade. When we came back from Peru the FBI arrested my Dad. They charged him with some kind of bullshit and our pictures were in the *Enquirer* and so I guess it's the end of public school for me.

I skated the whole summer long with my friends and came this close to losing my virginity along with my innocence.

I still talk to Matt in my dreams sometimes. But we're drifting apart. He has a world to watch over and I still have all those kid things to work through. We don't have much in common anymore. I'll always be haunted by my betrayal of him. Matt's a god now so maybe he'll forgive me, but I don't know if I can forgive myself. Yet it had to be done. And it's brought me and Dad a lot closer. We talk about everything now. He's the best



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dad in the whole world. Shit, I love him more now than in the old days, because I have to love him enough for me *and* Matt now.

I'm sure Dad will be back in business by next week. He'll never spend a day in jail, because we have the gods on our side. The FBI can't fight my brother, the silent one, the wind from the highest peak.

In the Andes there are gods all over the mountains. The gods are children—the most powerless of humans—who have been translated through death into the most powerful beings in the world. I guess that's only fair. It's good to know there's a god up there who has the same blood as me, who will always be my brother.

I'm looking forward to having Juanito here next summer. I miss having Matt around. It'd be good to have like a younger brother. I want to teach him how to do a perfect 360 degrees and how to scam with Chicago chicks. It'll be rad.

They better lay off the cocaine trade real soon. If they keep burning our crops I'll end up losing Juanito before I've even had a chance to know him. That'd suck. There aren't any mountains around here anyway, so we'd probably have to like buy a penthouse in the Sears tower and install an apartment size deep freeze. I guess those are the kinds of decisions I'm going to have to make one day.

It's harder to be a ruler of men, harder than you'll ever know. ●

**FROM:**

## A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

### NOT

Not, that nasty little snot,
  Must always disagree:
If you express the simplest thought,
  He'll say it cannot be.
He'll look you in the eye and say
  Your nose is not your own.
"Good morning," you'll say. "What a very nice day!"
  And Not will make a groan.
"It's *not*," says he. "Not good at all."
  And if you ask him why,
He'll only turn away and drawl,
  "I can't explain. Good-bye."

—Tom Disch



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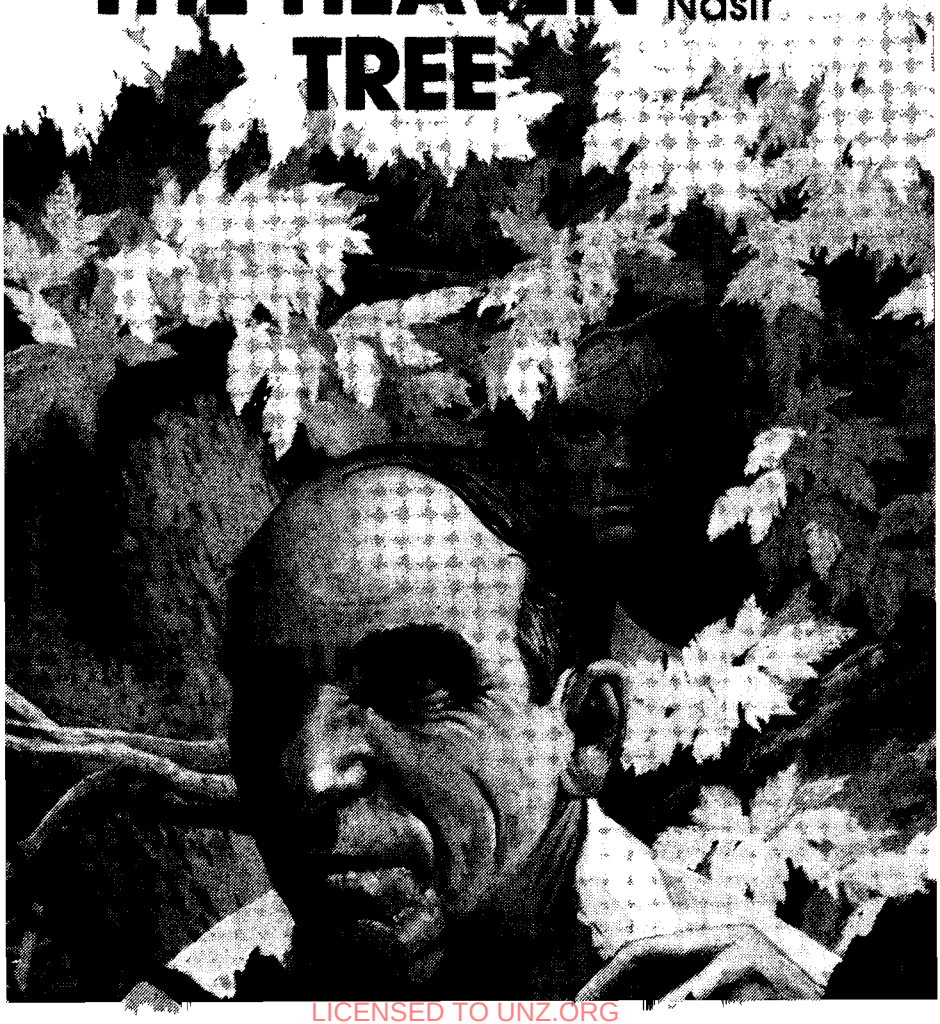
art: John Johnson

Jamil Nasir is a Palestinian-American who spent much of his childhood in Jerusalem and Amman. The author now practices law in Washington, DC, and he lives in a suburb with his wife Vicki and their daughter Aysha. Mr. Nasir's publications include tales in *Interzone* and *Universe*. "The Heaven Tree" is his first story for *IAsfm*.

# THE HEAVEN TREE

by Jamil Nasir



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# I

Garbage cans banging woke me up after midnight.

I lay still, hoping they wouldn't do it again. But they did, louder, with a lot of muffled giggling. I sat up and looked into shadows cast by streetlight through backyard trees and bushes. In the shadows pale figures moved. "Shhh!" I hissed, loud enough to be heard in the next block. But *they* didn't hear—a garbage can lid rattled to the ground, and a giggle became a laugh.

"Stupid—" I hissed.

A window shot up next door and a ringing screech drowned out my feeble warning. "Get out of there! Get out of there this minute or I'll call the police!"

Startled silence followed by attempted quietness exploded into more giggling.

"Just you wait, you devils," screeched Mrs. Nicholson, and slammed her window shut.

I sighed and went downstairs. By the time the rotating blue and white lights pulled silently up to Mrs. Nicholson's curb, I had smoothed the long side-hairs over my bald spot and tied a robe over my belly. I stepped out onto damp front lawn grass. The leaves on my maple tree were perfectly still, and the street was quiet, dark except where a large moth fluttered around Mrs. Nicholson's porch light.

A policeman was climbing Mrs. Nicholson's porch with heavy steps and jingling of handcuffs. The screen door opened, there was a low-voiced argument, and then the policeman stumped back down and across to my lawn.

I met him there. "Hello, Alan." I said.

"Hello, John," he said quietly, not slowing his long steps toward the walk that runs past my electric meter and forsythia bushes. I fell in behind him. A lone cricket creaked under the bushes.

"What are you going to do to them?" I asked.

"Arrest some or all of them for vagrancy and disturbing the peace. This is the third night this month."

The uncut grass of the back yard tickled my ankles. Streetlight speckled Alan's broad back.

"They didn't make much noise, Alan. And it was my garbage cans, not hers."

"Disturbing the peace is disturbing the peace, no matter whose garbage cans they are," said Alan, holding a tree branch so it wouldn't whip back on me. "Look at this place."

Beyond the sagging link fence separating my back yard from the Langley place, tall weeds cast spiny shadows on crab grass; skunk cabbage



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and wild rhubarb mingled shadowy leaves under untrimmed tree-branches; ivy twined around the columns of a leaning back porch and poked into the darkness of broken windows.

"Place ought to be condemned," said Alan, stepping over a trampled-down part of the fence. "Someone ought to call the Health Department."

I followed him, trying to keep my slippered feet off thorns. The weathered boards of the back porch creaked under us. Frightened whispers came from the darkness inside the open back door.

Alan switched on a flashlight and a streak of white and silver fled into the darkness of the house. I followed his heavy, steady tread along a mildewed hall, into what had once been Louise Ann Langley's clean, fussy front living room.

It wasn't clean and fussy anymore. A collection of old mattresses and cushions were spread on the floor, tattered blankets and even some hay strewn over them. A brown stain down one wall showed where the roof leaked. The furniture Louise Ann had been so proud of was broken up and piled against one wall, and cowering among the pieces were the current residents of the house, blinking their silver eyes in Alan's light.

"They all here?" he asked, shining the light over their gleaming silver hair and pale skin.

"Yes. Three females and two males."

"Which ones do you figure did the banging?"

I thought fast, for an insurance agent.

"That one over in the corner. Ananka. Ananka, come here."

There was a muffled cry, and one of the silver-haired creatures tried to burrow deeper behind a broken sofa.

I made my voice stern. "Ananka, come here. The policeman wants you to come out right now."

Ananka sobbed, slowly untangled herself from behind the sofa, and stepped into the light, trembling violently.

"Come here," I said again, pointing to a spot right in front of Alan.

She edged forward, sobbing, looking up into his face with her beautiful wide eyes.

Alan muttered a curse. When Ananka stopped in front of him, he said: "This can't be the one, John. She's not—she can't be sixteen years old."

"She's the one I saw. Ananka, this policeman is going to take you away to jail."

One of the males crouching in the pile of furniture started to blubber.

Ananka made a little helpless gesture then, spreading her hands and closing her eyes as if expecting to be seized on the spot and put in chains. It gave me chills; Ananka had had Crane's Syndrome almost four years now, and was heartbreakingly beautiful and young.



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"I've read they don't do too well in jail," I said. "She'll probably be dead in a few weeks if you take her."

He stood looking at her.

I pushed my luck a little further. "They won't cause any more disturbances. I'll be responsible."

"That's what you said the last time."

He took a threatening step toward Ananka.

"Do you want me to take you away in my police car?" he demanded fiercely.

She shook her head, eyes still closed, tears running down her face.

"How about the rest of you?" he snarled.

They scrambled deeper into the pile of furniture.

"If you make *any more noise,*" bellowed Alan, "I'm going to take all of you away in my police car and put you in jail. Understand?"

I had a hard time keeping up with him on the way back to his car. When we were almost there, I said: "I'll see to them, Alan, I promise."

He turned and jabbed a large finger at me. "I'm not kidding, John. I can't keep coming out here every week. The Department has new guidelines on the Craners: we have to arrest them and send them to relocation centers if we get complaints. The City is under a lot of pressure to get them off the streets."

"That's not fair. They aren't hurting anybody."

"You better tell that to your neighbor. If she calls me again, I'm going to take them in. I don't care how young they are. That's just all there is to it."

He got in the car, blue and white lights still rotating on top, rushed away from the curb with the slightest squeal of tires on the cool pavement.

On my way up to bed, I wondered if it would make any difference to him that Ananka was almost seventy years old.

## II

The next morning there was banging on my kitchen door. I stumbled downstairs, opening my eyes enough to see that it was eight-thirty and beams of yellow light someone else might have called cheerful were slanting through the windows.

Two Craners, Benjamin and Caroline, were at the door. Benjamin wore a dirty sleeveless sweatshirt and ancient dress pants torn off at the knee; Caroline had on a ragged dress three sizes too big for her.

"Do you have any more of those—anything to eat?" asked Benjamin politely, wrinkling his brow to make his face serious and grown up. I



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remembered when he had been Ben Wachter, the fat, imperious lawyer at the end of the block; now he was a tall, muscular boy with dirt smudges on his face. His eyes hadn't yet turned completely—there were still little flecks of brown in them.

"No more food for you," I said angrily. "You promised you wouldn't make any more noise at night."

"We won't," said Caroline. She had had the Syndrome almost as long as Ananka: her eyes were silver-grey, her tangled hair deep silver, her voice sweet as a bell.

"That's what you said last time."

"Well—we—we had—it fell down, by accident," struggled Benjamin, as if vaguely aware he had once been a great advocate. "We won't—anymore."

"The Mopsers knocked it down," put in Caroline.

"The who?"

"They're mean. They have big hairy wings, and big noses."

"And claws," said Benjamin.

"And eyeglasses," said Caroline.

"You can't see them—in the day," blurted Benjamin. "They hang—upside down—on the—" He waved his hands agitatedly.

I stared at them.

"We're hungry," said Caroline earnestly.

My defenses caved. "Well, you tell the others not to make any more noise, or there'll be no more food for you, Mopsers or no Mopsers," I said sternly. I rummaged in the refrigerator and found some stale bread, two peaches, and half a can of baked beans. "And don't go into Mrs. Nicholson's yard. *Ever*. Have you been remembering not to go into Mrs. Nicholson's yard?"

"Yes," said Benjamin, accepting the food.

"Oh, yes," said Caroline, wide-eyed.

"Thank you," said Benjamin gravely, and headed back down the garden, Caroline skipping behind tugging at his sweatshirt.

After breakfast I showered, shaved even though it was Saturday, oiled my hair carefully over my bald spot, and put on the blue suit I wear to interview prospective accounts. Then I went across to Mrs. Nicholson's front porch and rang the doorbell.

The door opened wide enough to show a pale eye and bony cheek.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Nicholson? I'm John Roberts, your next-door neighbor."

"Yes?"

"I'd like to talk to you about the Crane's Syndrome people that live behind us."

"What about them?"



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"Well—"

"Just a minute." A chain rattled off, the door opened, and I stepped into Mrs. Nicholson's front hall. It was spotlessly clean, with a grey rug and a dark, elderly knick-knack cabinet, but dimness hung in the corners like accumulated stale air or gloomy thoughts. Mrs. Nicholson herself was tall and bony, with white hair and frosty blue eyes.

"You're the man who keeps persuading the police not to arrest them," she told me. "I intend to put in a complaint about you."

"Ma'am, they can't help what they do. They can't think straight. It's a disease."

"Which they caught by fornication and adultery, every one of them. I'm a simple woman, Mr. Roberts, but I believe it's a judgment of God."

I followed her into a sitting room with ruffled curtains pulled close, crowded with faded furniture and more stale air.

"It's a virus, Mrs. Nicholson," I said, sitting on a sofa with a dry, musty smell. "Haven't you seen the TV specials? Crane's virus reverses the biological process in the cells responsible for aging. It's wonderful, in a way. The scientists are trying to find a way to use it as a kind of elixir of youth without the bad effects—hallucinations and loss of thinking ability—"

"God meant for man to grow old and die, Mr. Roberts," said Mrs. Nicholson, and I shifted my eyes under her cold gaze.

"You've got a house full of beautiful antique furniture here," I ventured finally. "Are you insured? I can get you a fire policy that—"

"This furniture is not *antique*, Mr. Roberts. We bought it the year after we were married, myself and my late husband, God rest his soul. He died a year ago, and my relations persuaded me I would be more comfortable in the city than on our farm. A great mistake. Sodom and Gommorah, and the police not even willing to protect decent people."

"Mrs. Nicholson," I coaxed, "will you come out back with me? I want to introduce you to one of them."

"I will not! I'm going to have them taken away! Every one of them!"

But she followed me down her narrow back hallway. She hadn't had visitors in a long time, I guessed, and she wasn't going to give me up so easily. I unbolted, unchained, and unlocked the kitchen door, and we stepped onto patio bricks crumbling and mossy from tree dampness. An aluminum lawn table and two aluminum chairs were sticky with tree resin and scattered with winged seed pods. The air was cool, and birds twittered in green shade. Farther off was the sound of leisurely weekend traffic on Thayer Avenue. Through the shrubs that lined Mrs. Nicholson's fence, I saw a silvery figure poking around in one of my garbage cans.

"Ananka," I called gently.



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The figure jumped, ready to run.

"Ananka," I called again. "Come here, honey. I want you to meet someone."

She stayed warily still, watching with large, alert eyes as I led Mrs. Nicholson to the bottom of the garden.

"I'll give you an orange."

She hopped lightly over the fence. Mrs. Nicholson shrank back. I grabbed Ananka's hand, pulled her closer.

It was rare to see a four-year Craner—they all seemed to wander off somewhere after awhile—her silver gazelle eyes, thick silver hair, ivory skin, delicate pouting lips were astonishingly beautiful. A small, exquisite breast peeped through a tear in her scavenged shirt, and her legs were slender and strong below tattered shorts.

"Can you say 'Hello, Mrs. Nicholson'?" I coaxed her.

"Hello, Mrs. Nubberson," she muttered shyly.

"Cover yourself, girl, aren't you ashamed?" scolded Mrs. Nicholson, but her eyes were not unkind. I pulled Ananka's shirt so that the breast was hidden.

"Isn't she something?" I said, smoothing tangles out of her hair. "Four years ago she was a crotchety old lady who watched Bible TV all day and yelled at kids that walked on her lawn. Her husband Ralph got the Syndrome from one of the first Craners to wander into the neighborhood, before the epidemic really exploded. They called her Alisa, and she slept under a picnic table in Montgomery Park for a few months, and I think most of the men in the neighborhood took turns with her. No one had ever seen anybody that beautiful before. I know Les Mansfield caught it from her. And Ralph Langley was pretty frisky for an old guy. Anyway, pretty soon his hair was turning from white to silver, and his old thin body getting tall and straight. Louise Ann—Ananka—had a fit and threw him out. He slept in the park for awhile, getting younger and stronger every day. He used to come around and ask for food, his clothes all dirty and his eyes turning silver.

" 'Johnny-boy, you got to try this,' he told me once. 'I feel like—I don't know, but I ain't felt this way in a long time.' Then after awhile he didn't recognize me anymore.

"Louise Ann took him back in after he reached that stage. I guess she loved him. And also, by that time he was big and handsome in a way the old Ralph never was. You wouldn't think it of an old lady like that, but pretty soon the fat seemed to be melting off her, and her hair turning silver.

"That was four years ago. About two years ago Ralph wandered off somewhere, the way they do, and Louise Ann started calling herself



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Ananka, and the other Craners from the neighborhood have been living with her ever since. Right, honey?"

She nodded obediently, without understanding. Then she put her arms around me and buried her head in my shoulder.

"Dubby, can I have my orange now?" she asked. Dubby was the name the Craners had for me.

Mrs. Nicholson's head jerked, and she looked at me in sudden horror.

"You!" she gasped, and backed away, reached her kitchen door with long strides, and slammed and locked it behind her.

## III

Late that night there was a tremendous noise in the Langley yard, a confusion of shouts, screams, and animal snarls. I had reached my back fence, slipperless and sleep-blind, side-hairs hanging down my face, when I collided with a sobbing Roberta. I held her.

"Ananka," was all she could sob. "Ananka."

I ran, thorns cutting my feet.

Three Craners knelt in the tall weeds, metallic hair and pale skin lit by moon and streetlight. I pushed a blubbering Les aside and saw Ananka lying on the ground, glistening dark liquid smeared on her shirt.

"What happened?" I hissed, and when they only went on moaning, grabbed Les fiercely by the neck and shook him, yelling: "What happened?"

He sobbed: "A bad doggie—'Nanka gave him some bread—he—he—"

I knelt over her. She was breathing.

"Pick her up," I yelled over their noise. "Pick her up and carry her up to my house. Come on, she's not dead, you idiots! Les, you hear me?"

I finally got Les and Benjamin to lift her. Then, as if suddenly struck by the importance of their mission, they ran headlong into my yard. I followed as fast as I could, cursing.

"Don't drop her! Slow down!" I puffed, caught up with them at the kitchen door, switched on the light. They laid her on the yellow formica table, knocking down the salt and pepper shakers.

Her right hand and forearm were mangled, blood spattered on her shirt and shorts. She was chalk-white, eyes slitted, breath shallow. I was dialing 911 with trembling hands when there was a heavy knock at the front door. I dropped the phone and ran to open it.

It was Alan, and behind him Mrs. Nicholson in a robe with yellowed lace at the cuffs. Alan opened his mouth sternly, but I started yelling. I don't remember what I said. He strode into the kitchen. When he saw Ananka, his jaw got square.



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"Help me carry her," he said.

She was surprisingly heavy. Mrs. Nicholson held the screen door. When the Craners saw us carrying Ananka toward the squad car, they set up a howling.

"Be still this minute! They're not going to hurt her!" Mrs. Nicholson snapped, shooing them with one hand and the hem of her robe. We laid Ananka in the back seat, I squatting by her head. As we squealed away, I thought I saw Mrs. Nicholson with her arm around one of the male Craners, smoothing his hair like a little boy's.

## IV

Dawn was pale in the sky, quiet and grey along the street when Ananka and I got back from the hospital in a cab. I got her under one arm and the cabbie got her under the other and we walked her wobbly legs upstairs to the tiny guest bedroom with the floral bedspread and wallpaper. I gave the cabbie a beer and a big tip, and when I went back upstairs she was asleep, her face pale and serene.

I went to bed too, woke up around noon, took a shower, then tapped at the guest bedroom door. There was no answer. I turned the knob quietly and peeked in. Ananka was crouching on the windowsill in a little wedge of sunlight, wearing her clean hospital nightgown, bandaged arm hanging helplessly at her side. She seemed to be staring out at the Langley yard.

I put my arms around her, eased her down off the sill. She felt hot and her cheeks were flushed.

"You have to stay in bed, honey," I told her. "The doctor said so."

She put her well hand out toward the window. "Ralph," she said.

"You remember Ralph?" I asked, walking her to the bed. "I thought you'd forgotten all about old Ralph."

I got her to lie down, tucked the covers over her, smoothed her hair. Her eyes were still fixed on the window.

"You want me to move you over there so you can look out?"

She nodded.

I got her out of bed again, sat her in the faded pink armchair, got the mattress off, pushed the frame over by the window, and was sweating and grunting when the doorbell rang. It was a grey, tired-looking man in white with a black medical bag.

"I'm the paramedic," he said. "They should have told you I'd be coming."

"Oh yeah. Her rabies shots." I led him up to the bedroom.

Ananka was crouching on the windowsill again. I gathered her down,



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sat her in the armchair. The paramedic stared at her open-mouthed; then he busied himself with his black bag. I thought his hands shook a little.

"Want a beer?" I asked him on the way downstairs, after he had given her the shot.

He frowned. "Yeah."

We sat at the kitchen table with cans in front of us.

"You a doctor?" I asked him.

"No." He watched me steadily from protruding, muddy eyes. He had longish sandy hair, not too clean, combed back from his forehead, face wrinkles he didn't seem old enough for. "Couldn't get in."

"I've heard it's tough. I'm an insurance salesman myself."

He nodded and took a long drink.

"Now, Crane's Syndrome," I said. "I've seen a lot of programs on it, but—"

"It's a virus," he said. "Sexually transmitted. Corrects information loss in cell DNA."

"I've heard that," I said. "But why does it make them, you know, feeble-minded?"

"Not feeble-minded. Synaptically retrograded."

"What?"

"Retrograded." He looked at his watch. "You know how Crane's Syndrome works?"

"Well—"

"There's a class of viruses—called retroviruses—that punch holes in cells and attack their DNA. DNA—deoxyribonucleic acid—is the information-bearing molecule in the cell that tells it how to grow and what functions to perform, right? Most retroviruses reprogram the DNA so the cell becomes a little factory manufacturing more viruses. That's how viruses reproduce. That's how they make you sick.

"Except for Crane's virus. Its program is different. Nobody knows why or how. Somewhere, somehow, it picked up a perfect template of human DNA, and when it penetrates a cell it actually corrects defects, imperfections or mistakes in the DNA, using the same DNA-programming mechanism normal viruses use, but in this case reversing the effects of aging. Aging happens when, through repeated cell division, DNA information is damaged or lost. Happens all the time. The Crane's Syndrome virus goes in and fixes that. Right?"

I nodded.

"Well, Crane's Syndrome attacks the nerve cells of the brain too. But brain tissue ages differently than other tissue. Brain cells don't die and reproduce like other cells—you have the same brain cells your whole life long. What happens is, as you age, synaptogenesis occurs—connections form between brain cells, reflecting your experiences and the growth of



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reasoning ability. Well, Crane's virus' action on cell DNA causes the brain cells to revert to their original, youthful form—they gradually withdraw their connections from each other. That's the retrograde part. As the cells get less and less interconnected the patient forgets things, loses built-up cognitive structures, until finally, in theory, he ends up with the brain of a newborn infant, completely unformed, unstructured, and without preconceptions."

"So they see the world like little children."

He shrugged, idly tapping his empty can on the table. "Cognitive tests show their senses are very sharp, like children's."

I got him another beer from the refrigerator. "So how do they die? Do they die, ever?"

"I've seen dead ones. Accidents, falls, poison."

"But I mean *natural* death. They don't ever grow old and die? The TV says there have been mysterious—"

"The TV is a bunch of morons. Some nut says he's seen Craners fly into the air or vanish and the TV reports it as fact, but when the government does controlled longitudinal studies, they call that a coverup. The Syndrome has only been observed for nine years, not long enough to find out much about it."

"But there've been so many reports—"

He shrugged irritably, looked at his watch.

"I have to be going," he said, and finished the rest of his beer in one long drink. "I'm late for my next appointment." He stood up, suddenly anxious.

"I'm not supposed to drink on duty," he mumbled resentfully as I let him out.

I took Ananka oranges and jelly toast—her favorite foods—for dinner, but she hardly noticed. She chewed absently, staring out the window. I watched her curiously. She seemed to stare not at her old homestead, but at the oak tree that branched stories above it.

"What do you see up in that big old tree?" I asked, trying to coax a piece of jelly toast into her mouth.

"Ralph."

"Ralph? Honey, Ralph isn't up there."

She was silent, chewing meditatively.

## V

The next couple of days her fever went down and she started paying more attention to things around her. I rescheduled appointments, called



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in sick at the office, fed her oranges, jelly toast, peanut butter, mashed potatoes, ice cream until you would have thought she would get fat; but she didn't. She stayed amazingly beautiful, and her sweet voice filled my house with a kind of silver light. The paramedic (whose name was Payden) didn't stay to talk anymore; he gave her her shots with hands that I thought trembled, answered my questions and pleasantries in monosyllables. His eyes avoided Ananka: instead he attended to the devices that measured her—thermometer, stethoscope, sphygmomanometer. Benjamin and the girls came up every day for food. I didn't see Les. I didn't see or hear Mrs. Nicholson.

Tuesday night I put Ananka in bed and fixed her a bowl of mashed potatoes with milk and butter. I sat in the pink armchair, working on a TV dinner.

"Ananka, what happened to Ralph?" I asked after we had chewed for awhile.

"Went to heaven," she said matter-of-factly through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"You mean he died?"

"No. Climbed."

"Climbed what?"

She pointed out the window with her spoon.

"He climbed that tree to heaven?"

She nodded. "Can I have some ice cream?"

I got her a bowl, with chocolate sauce.

"Well—where is heaven?" I asked, watching her maul the ice cream clumsily.

She waved her spoon at the ceiling, scattering creamy drops.

I wiped them up with my napkin. "What's it like?"

"Pretty." Her eyes were suddenly excited. "Blue. Blue like high grass. The wind ruffles it. Clouds blow like big cows." She laughed. "The sun is an old man looking down. Pretty."

I tried to read her eyes. They turned back to the ice cream. "That's where people go when they die?"

"No. You climb."

"Why don't *you* climb up there?"

"Not ready yet. Almost ready."

She gave me a winning smile and her bowl flipped over and smeared ice cream down her front like black and vanilla blood.

"Ooooh!" she gasped, and laughed.

I peeled off the ruined sheets, scooped as much half-melted gook as I could back into the bowl, led her to the bathroom. I ran water in the tub, taped a plastic trash bag over her bandaged arm.

"You remember how to take a bath?" I asked her.



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She shook her head shyly.

I wielded a bar of soap. "When I go out, take off all your clothes and get in the water and rub yourself all over with this. Don't get it in your eyes—"

She took off all her clothes—her hospital gown—in one quick motion, struck a lewd pose, laughed delightedly at the shock on my face. I handed her the soap, staring dizzily at silver tresses falling past carved ivory shoulders, the slender, laughing belly, delighted silver eyes.

She held the soap out to me. "You."

"Oh, no."

I backed out and went downstairs, shaking my head. I was on my second beer before I realized that the running and splashing of water upstairs was louder than it should be. I ran back up. Water streamed down the hall from under the bathroom door, and when I yanked it open a three-inch wave drowned my slippers. Ananka sat in the overflowing tub splashing and singing, the soap floating unheeded in a corner. I waded in and turned off the faucets.

She grabbed my arm and tipped me into the bathtub. I went under in a cloud of floating silver hair, like a man drowned by a mermaid. I came up coughing, Ananka was laughing, and more water than ever was pouring onto the floor.

"Be serious, honey," I pleaded, too waterlogged to be angry. I stood up in my soaking clothes and she pulled me down again with a splash. Then she was on top of me, straddling me with her strong legs, looking into my eyes with her hypnotic ones, and kissing me.

"Love 'Nanka?" she murmured, caressing my wet hair, her breath sweet and musky. "Want to climb up to heaven with 'Nanka and Ralph? Want to?"

I heaved out of the water with my last strength, spilling her backwards with a splash and a flash of long legs, ran out of there, trailing gallons of water.

Many beers later I was sitting on the dark patio, smelling cool humid leaves and thinking to the best of my ability, when a pale movement caught my eye. I squinted into Mrs. Nicholson's back yard. Someone crept through its shadows.

I stood up. "Hey!"

The figure froze, becoming part of a tree shadow. I walked unsteadily to the fence.

"Les," I said as sternly as my condition allowed. "Les, if that's you, I want you to come here right this minute."

The pale figure edged forward and Les looked down at me with frightened eyes.



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"Didn't I tell you *never* to go into Mrs. Nicholson's yard?" I snarled. "You'll get everybody in trouble, you stupid lout. What have you got in your hand there?"

His huge left hand uncurled slowly and he looked down into it, seeming as shocked as I was. Two fresh oranges lay in his palm.

"You—you broke into her house?" I gasped. "To steal food?"

He shook his head desperately. "She asked me," he moaned.

"Don't you lie to me! Why would she ask you, you—"

"To help her."

"Help her do what?"

"Climb."

I was still swaying with my mouth open when he shrank away into the darkness at the bottom of the garden.

As soon as I had my breath back I marched over to Mrs. Nicholson's front porch. Four days of newspapers lay ungathered on the steps. I rang the doorbell and waited, then rang and waited twice more, then started to hammer. I was about to go back and call the police when bolts clicked and the door opened an inch. An eye looked out.

"Mrs. Nicholson?"

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"I—I haven't seen you for a few days—I just thought I'd come over and check if—"

"I'm quite all right, thank you," she said. "Thank you for asking." And she shut the door.

I walked back across my lawn, thinking. That was Mrs. Nicholson, all right—there was no mistaking her voice. But the voice was a little different too; a shade deeper, a taste slower. Younger.

I had a hard time sleeping that night.

## VI

The next day I got into my blue suit and went to work, making Ananka promise to be good and leaving the door unlocked for Payden. When I got home in the evening, she was sitting cross-legged on the kitchen table, eating peanut butter out of a jar with her finger. She smiled brilliantly at me.

"Did the man come?" I asked, putting groceries away in the refrigerator.

She nodded, and laughed excitedly.

"What are you so happy about?" I asked, suddenly suspicious.



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"Nothing." She looked demure, waggled a peanut butter-covered finger at me, and blushed.

I cooked dinner in a bad mood. I was dishing up the mashed potatoes before I realized what was wrong: I was jealous. Stupid, I told myself as I carried the dinner tray up the stairs. Ananka was close to seventy, well past the age of consent. And if Payden wanted to violate the laws against sexual contact with persons known to be infected with Crane's Syndrome and turn into a pea-brain, that was his business.

Ananka seemed to feel the weight of my thoughts. We ate in silence. The next afternoon when I came home from work she was gone.

I climbed over the fence and picked my way through the Langley yard in the long yellow light, burrs sticking to my pants, grasshoppers jumping around my feet. Ananka was squatting on the broken-down front porch, gazing out at Thayer Avenue. She smiled at me, stretched her arms up for a hug. Her bandage had gotten smudged with dirt, but she seemed altogether well, just like the old Ananka. Craners heal fast, they say. I stooped and held her, drinking in the young, sweet feeling of her. She looked into my eyes, then looked past me and laughed, as if at something joyful in the distance. All I could see was afternoon traffic on Thayer.

"Come up later—if you want some oranges," I told her.

She gave another happy laugh.

I straightened and walked away heavily. Just before I rounded the corner of the house she called out: "Dubby?"

I looked back.

"Everybody has to climb."

I nodded, went on.

My house seemed elderly and shabby, aged yellow sunlight lighting dusty silence. I moved the guest room furniture back the way it had been before, ate dinner alone in the kitchen, stacking the dishes in the sink. Nobody came up begging for food, which was unusual. After dinner I tried to watch TV. A storm was brewing, thunder muttering above the perky game-show host's voice, and a copper-colored dusk falling early. I finally turned the TV off and stood outside my front door smelling the wet electrical air, watching the high distances mist faintly. When the wind gusted and the first big drops spattered through the maple tree, I went back inside. On my way to shut the upstairs windows I caught sight of someone in the hall mirror: a fat little man with stubby, careful hands slung self-consciously at his sides. There were deep creases between the edges of his nose and lips, and above his creased forehead a stiff unnatural surface of hair thinly covered his scalp from ear to ear. Rain was drumming on the roof now, and I could hear the bedroom curtains flapping. I found some scissors and went into the bathroom, cut off the long



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side hairs that covered my head and threw them into the wastebasket, where they lay exhausted and oily. When I was done, the face in the mirror was egg-like and fleshy, vulnerable, the eyes hot. I fell asleep with rain pounding on the roof, and had uneasy dreams.

Much later I woke in a crash of thunder and ran from the room, blundered downstairs and through the kitchen, fumbled with locks until the door flew open, ran down waterlogged grass to where a half-foot pool had formed at the bottom of the garden. Rain flayed through bowed branches, and my pajamas were as soaked as if I had been swimming. The streetlight flickered off in a burst of lightning and thunder crackled almost instantly. I slogged through tall weeds, climbed the porch and plunged through the black doorway of the Langley house.

I blundered into a wall, stood dripping in the darkness.

"Ananka?" I called. "Ananka, I'm ready. I want to go with you."

There was silence except for rain drumming on the side of the house, pattering through a broken window. I felt my way along the wall. The air was wet, mildewed; in one place water spattered down from a leak. A faint light flickered ahead of me. I went through a doorway. Four fair-skinned, silver-haired figures sat very still around a guttering candle in Louise Ann Langley's old living room.

"Ananka?" I said timidly.

"She's not here," said Benjamin, rousing himself from his stillness. "She's gone."

"Gone? Where?" I demanded, advancing into the room with what I could muster of my old sternness. "Where?"

"She cli-," started Roberta, but cut off at a sharp look from the others.

I stared for a few seconds, then ran wildly out into the rain where the old oak tree stood. Up among swaying, shaking branches, way at the top, I thought I saw a pale figure. I jumped and grabbed a low branch, pulled with all my might.

"Ananka!" I screamed, but it was drowned in lightning and thunder.

I clawed and scrambled, holding tight to the slippery branches, blinded by rain, breath tearing at my lungs, lightning crashing, leaves hissing, the lights of the town dim and watery far below, and finally I reached a place where the branches were thin and the trunk bent dangerously under me. I hung there in rain and wind.

A yard above the reach of my hands, hanging from the last branches that melted off into the air, Ananka's half-unraveled arm-bandage swayed and shook.

And then a bolt of lightning forked down, lighting bright white a country I had never known: clouds like towers, cliffs, and plains shifting and rushing to a dark horizon, the tops of trees a rippling and dashing sea, and between, a vault where shimmered a billion gleaming drops in which I could almost hear the sweet voices of the dead. ●



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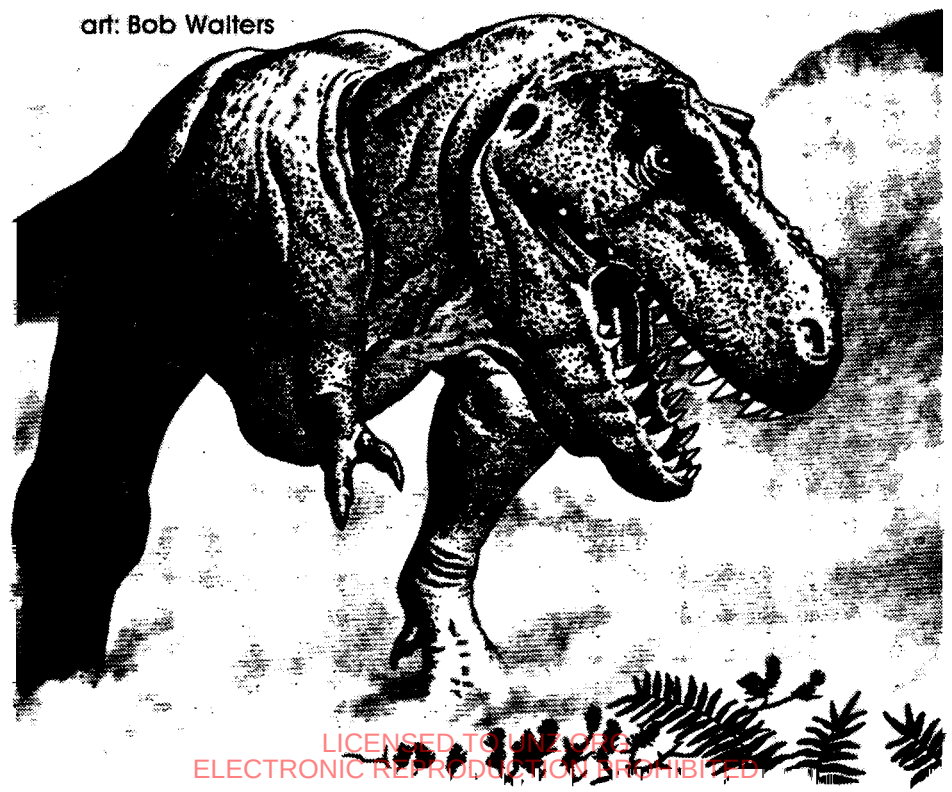
# THE VIRGIN AND THE DINOSAUR

## by R. Garcia y Robertson

"The Virgin and the Dinosaur" is a prequel to the author's popular novella, "By the Time We Got to Gaugamela" (October 1991). In the latter tale, Jake and Peg had been married and running Time Tours Unlimited for several years. Their adventures had to start somewhen, and what could be a more exciting beginning for our intrepid time travelers than a date in the Upper Cretaceous . . . ? The author's first book, *The Spiral Dance,* was published by William Morrow last October. Mr. Garcia has sold the novel's sequel, as well as a Native American fantasy, to Avonova.

art: Bob Walters



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WELCOME to
Hell Creek, Montana
pop. 2

Toothed and feathered proto-birds scurried on clawed wings into the upper branches; the screen of Mesozoic ferns and flowering trees parted. Jake Bento watched a tall, red-haired young woman step naked into the clearing—she moved from the shoulders and waist; bare athletic legs bunching, then releasing with each step.

At that point-instant, Jake had Time by the tail. Five minutes before, he had navigated the Hell Creek portal perfectly, acing the coveted First Run with *no nasty shocks*. Microamps in his middle ear beat out an ancient victory anthem, "Light My Fire" by the Doors.

"Isn't it won-der-ful?" Peg rose on her toes, stretching in the steamy Montana air. Beads of sweat ran down between her breasts, across the swell of her belly, to gleam in her red triangle of pubic hair.

Jake had bent down to do a reactor check. When he'd looked up, Peg had shucked blanket coat, buckskins, and moccasins. He grinned in appreciation. "Welcome to the *fucking* Mesozoic."

His mix of Universal and English puzzled Peg. Jake tuned down the Doors, reprogramming for full Universal. "Yes, undoubtedly essential. Premium quality."

"You make it sound like a meat substitute. What does '*fucking*' mean?" Peg picked up the awe and reverence Jake packed into the English obscenity.

"A verbal noun, indicating affection." He dodged around the strict definition. "Intense personal affection."

"Well, then this whole *fucking* world is ours." She swung her arms to indicate the ferns and dogwoods, the pool, the sky, the dry riverbed. Insects buzzed about.

Just like Adam and Eve. Jake thought it, but did not say it. The absolute wonder of hitting that first point-instant in a new place had faded. Jake lived at the leading edge of FTL. He was the one who had brought them here. Peg was the neophyte, a raw first-timer, picked for this run because she happened to be young, healthy, ambitious, and overqualified—Biofile rated her a dinosaur-genius. Only a beginner would lay claim to an entire world-era just because humans had finally arrived.

Jake's job was to play trusty guide and willing manservant—show *memsahib* the period, haul her gear, bring her back intact. Rendering physical and personal assistance, *as needed*. Easy enough. The sort of assignment Jake could thrive on. Thousands of skilled and dedicated stay-at-homes had worked, sweated, and sacrificed so that he could share this clearing, this whole planet, with a criminally graceful Ph.D. in paleontology. He *owed* it to them to have fun.

She followed his gaze, seeming to notice her body for the first time. "Sorry. My skin needed to breathe. It's so incredibly hot." Fahrenheit surface temperature had tripled since passing the portal. "You don't mind, do you? We are adults."



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"Mind? Not in the smallest." Jake was wearing moccasins and fringed leggings, soft as gloves, and a cotton annuity shirt given to him by the River Crow, but he had nothing against nudity. Cretaceous Montana was made for it—mesothermic climate, no rude neighbors—none that cared anyway.

However, he noted an alarming wholesomeness in the way Peg said "adults." As if sex only took place between tipsy teenagers or incurable juveniles. There was no hard, fixed rule that team members had to fuck—but Jake expected it. With Peg, he put a priority on it. Five minutes into the job, she had shucked everything but her belly-button. Fabulous. But Peg probably just enjoyed the feel of warm air. The blending with nature. Her nudity was not meant for *him.*

"So, when do we sight dinosaurs." She swiveled on her toes like a dancer, trying to see over the foliage.

*"Say what?"* He slipped back into English, still captivated by smallish breasts and large dark nipples.

"Dinosaurs. Huge archosaurs. Dominant megafauna of this period. Where *are* they?"

"Give them a moment." Jake was moderately pleased *not* to have stepped out of the Hell Creek portal into the path of megafauna with big teeth and Bad Attitudes. A nonsignificant worry—the Mesozoic was a huge place; the very size of dinosaurs meant that they were rare, rarer than elk or rhino in a nature park. Navigating the Hell Creek anomaly had been infinitely more chancy. Jake had a private horror of portal skips—of just vanishing, leaving no clues, no clothes, nothing but the anomaly that ate you. With a dinosaur, at least you *knew* you were being devoured.

So far, Upper Cretaceous Montana resembled pre-contact Australia. The pool he sat by might have been a South Kimberly billabong in the Dreamtime. Little creatures stirring the brush seemed no more dangerous than a goanna or a roo.

"Come look." Peg pushed aside a flowering branch. "We could have hit the wrong era—Lower Paleocene instead of the Uppermost Cretaceous. That would be devastating." Hell Creek was the last stop for dinosaurs; in an eye-blink of geologic time, the huge creatures would be gone.

Never doubting his navigation, Jake took the excuse to stand behind her, making concerned noises, inhaling her odor. Short copper curls tickled the nape of her neck. Sweat beaded at the base of her spine.

The landscape *was* dull. Dense vegetation hugged the dry riverbed. The flats beyond were open canopy plains, hotter than a skillet, covered with scrub pines and thorny berry bushes. Peg must have made the mistake of trying to explore; Jake noted thin fresh scratches on her creamy hip.

A thunderous buzzing shook the air. Streaking from the sand by the billabong, a vicious metal-blue insect homed straight for them. Peg leaped backward, twisting and slapping at the whirring horror. Jake's shoulder holster slid a flat neural stunner into his palm. He yelped, "Drop."



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Peg flattened on the sandy bank, and he fanned the air above her. The flying devil fell like a lead slug onto the wet sand. Peg pounced on the downed insect, prying open the jaws.

"See here." She waved the stunned bug beneath Jake's nostrils. "Mandibles meant for dinosaur. Nothing in the Lowest Paleocene would take jaws like *that* to chew through."

He agreed. The saw-toothed dental work looked ferocious.

Peg tossed the insect aside.

By now, Jake knew the tone to take. Peg had worked herself into a paleontological frenzy just to get here. He had to impress her with his calm professionalism, feigned indifference, and rugged charm. A truly inspirational aspect of this expedition was that things did not have to happen all at once. He and Peg would share a campfire tonight, and breakfast tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow. Sooner or later, they were sure to be wearing out the same sleeping bag. Cheered by that certainty, he hummed through the rest of his equipment check.

Jake ticked off each item twice. He had a fabulous memory—360 megabytes of RAM tucked in the compweb stretched atop his skull, along with his navmatrix and music files. A Crazy Dog Blackfoot once tried to lift Jake's hair—not for any personal reasons; just part of the usual hysteria accompanying a Crow attack. One look under Jake's scalp, and the Crazy Dog dropped his knife and ran, spooked by gleaming fiberoptics. At a kill-talk, Jake returned the knife. The Crazy Dog apologized. Swore he would never scalp another Wasichu.

Buckskins, dehydrated rations, shock-rifle, microstove, and lounge chairs were broken down, collapsed, and closest-packed to fit through the portal. The Hell Creek anomaly was newly opened, poorly mapped, generally a tight squeeze. The 12 megawatt mobile fusion reactor had been the most obstinate piece, harder to get through than everything else combined. People passed easily—too easily, becoming the victims of portal skips or spontaneous transmission. Metals and hardwired electronics were the worst. Only the length of stay and the ground to cover justified bringing the reactor. A herd of pack ponies would have been easier to fit through the portal, but who knew how oatburners would take to Mesozoic Asiamerica. For openers, there was no grass.

Check completed. Jake kicked the reactor, mentally telling the gray 1.5 meter cube to get into mobile mode. With a whirr and click, the reactor sprouted four shiny legs, with white rings on the ends. The whirr became a softer hiss. The white rings inflated into four balloon tires. "Mobile" reactors were made to live up to the name.

Jake climbed to a perch atop the pack saddle, reaching down for Peg. "So, will you come a-waltzing Matilda with me?"

"Wat-zing Ma-tilta?" Peg looked up. She was crouched on one knee, squeezing gravelly mud through her fingers—half eager scientist, half wood nymph. "This *has* to be Hell Creek. Sediment's too dry and rocky for the Tullock formation." She brushed the dirt off.

Time Shock. Jake recognized symptoms of a mild attack. Peg was



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doubting the period, feeling the air and mud, proving to herself that this world was real. Well, it *was* real. It was *Earth*. Human population, two. But Home and civilization were sixty-five million years away, thirty times farther than a trip to the Andromeda galaxy at lightspeed.

"I'll show you dinosaurs. Promise." Jake knew they were bound to see the big beasts soon. He might as well claim credit now.

Her eyes lit. "Even sauropods? It's essential I see sauropods." Sauropods were the *big* boys: brontosaurs, titanosaurs, supersaurs, and ultrasaurs. Few had made it to the Upper Cretaceous—none were known in Hell Creek.

"Sure, sauropods." He extended his hand further. "Don't make 'em wait."

She took his offered hand, vaulting easily onto the saddle beside him.

Jake told the reactor, "Downstream." They lurched into motion, splashing through ponds and puddles, keeping to the lowest part of the bed, feeling for the main channel. Steep banks and ginkgo trees turned the wash into a green canyon topped by a blue ribbon of sky. Pneumatic tires left silent prints in the bare mud.

Upper Cretaceous Montana had a semi-tropic climate and a swampy coastline; somewhere downstream was the shallow Midwestern Sea separating Asiamerica from Euramerica. For the last twenty million years, continents had been drifting apart. Montana was on the east coast of the supercontinent Asiamerica, a great arc connecting Mexico to Malaysia—taking in the northern Pacific Rim, China, Siberia, and Mongolia. The Urals were a far western archipelago.

Greenhouse gases filled the air. Water smelled alkaline, and Jake saw signs of chemical erosion—soils leached by acid rain. Sort of like the twenty-first century Old Style, without the overpopulation, money collapse, and stock market hysteria.

The young Mesozoic sun sank quickly. Jake unshipped his shock-rifle. Late afternoon was hunting time in hot climates. He boosted his hearing, tripping the microamps in his middle ear. The rustle of wind and leaves became a roar.

Craning his neck, he switched his corneal lenses from wide-angle to telescopic, searching for fine details. Nothing. No snapped twigs. No three-toed tracks. None of the shed teeth commonly found in Hell Creek rock. The absence of animals was eerie.

"I've seen fossil beds with more life than this," complained Peg, her forearm on his shoulder. Words boomed in his boosted ears.

He finished fitting the shock-rifle together—telescopic vision made each part seem huge as prefab sewer pipe.

She eyed the assembled rifle. "Nine out of ten animals in the Hell Creek formation are harmless herbivores. Chances are less than one in a hundred of meeting a really hungry carnivore. Are you worried?"

"Me? Never." He noted that Peg still talked in terms of sediment formations and fossil ratios, as if this were a bone hunt, not a living, breathing world. Trundling around a corner, they startled a wee furry fellow drinking from one of the ponds. It scampered for the undergrowth.



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Peg leaped to the ground, recorder running. "Why didn't you stun it?"

"Because it was rabbit-sized and scared senseless." The shock-rifle was designed for dinosaurs, and would have blasted the tiny mammal's central nervous system straight out its eyeballs. "I don't expect it was dangerous."

"It was probably a protoungulate—closer to a horse than a rabbit." She fingered prints in the soft mud, and reviewed her recordings—a 3V image of the creature repeated the scurry for safety several times.

"But how am I supposed to *know*, if I don't get a look at its teeth?"

Jake knew all about the paleontologist's love affair with teeth. Teeth preserved well and told you a lot. Careers were launched by broken molars—and they were happy as dental hygenists to see a clean, complete set.

"Oh, *great*, some droppings!" Peg poked and sniffed through a pile of wet turds squeezed out by the terrified mammal. "A genuine browser; bet he had real grinders."

She climbed back aboard, patting the shock-rifle. "Stow the nuke. Your stunner would be more helpful."

Jake slipped out of his shoulder holster, twisted about, and fit the holster over Peg's bare shoulder. Her skin felt smooth and dry beneath his fingers. "Here, Annie Oakley, blaze away at the rodents, just don't hit me."

"Annie Oakley?"

"Friend of Sitting Bull's. I'll tell you about her someday—maybe introduce you." When he was not on the warpath, Sitting Bull had a relaxed and amiable way with women, even Wasichu women, one of the reasons Jake admired the medicine man.

They did not see any more of the tiny horses-to-be. Jake spotted a foot-long tree rat, which Peg thought was a primitive possum. She could not be sure because she was slow with the stunner, not having the bioimplants to control the holster.

The streambed widened into a broad expanse of hardpan, cracked into blocks by the heat, each block as flat and regular as a piece of old paving. Jake smelled the oily reek of a jungle river. He halted, spotting a reptilian tail stretching back from the bank. Black fisher-storks stalked about, stepping over the scaly tail.

"That's nothing." Peg dismissed the tail with a shake of her head. "An archosaur, but hardly a dinosaur."

Boosting up, Jake saw a dozen big crocodiles basking in the afternoon sun; five-meter eating machines—jaws, stomach, and a tail. (If you don't believe there are crocs in Montana, just ask the River Crow.) These weren't the gigantic dinosaur-eating crocodiles found in Texas, but *all* crocs were cunning, dangerous brutes who would outlive the dinosaurs. The nearest one looked maybe three times as long as Jake, and easily ten times as mean.

Peg put down her recorder. "It's so *nonessential*, seeing everything but dinosaurs."



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"Relax." Jake hopped down, keeping an eye on the crocs. He did not expect any to come dashing over the hardpan, but it never paid to turn your back on the reptilian brain. Gripping Peg's waist, he swung her to the ground, feeling her skin, smelling her fragrance, forgetting all about the crocs amid the burst of flesh. Strange how her sweat didn't stink. "I'll show you more dinosaurs than you ever dreamed of."

She smiled, "Not likely. I've dreamed nothing *but* sauropods since being picked for this."

Pack saddle and equipment cases followed her onto the hardpan. Then Jake sent the reactor lumbering down to the river for a drink, trailing an anchor line.

The crocs looked up. One took a speculative snap at the big balloon tires. Jake sent it a jarring shock from the reactor's defense system. After that the crocs ignored the reactor. Too big to swallow and too tough to chew. They let the ungainly newcomer waddle into midstream and toss out a second anchor.

While the reactor drank, Jake laid out sleeping bags and pink champagne, dragging in driftwood for a fire, telling the microstove to whip up dinner.

Peg was fetching in her stunner and shoulder holster, running about recording the sleepy crocs and the flowering trees, radiating megawatts of misplaced energy.

He watched her zoom in on the black fisher-storks that were stalking about the shallows like operatic vampires. The tall birds spread their wings before them, forming black feather capes, shading out surface glare. Ducking their heads inside the dark canopies, they would strike at fish, then step gingerly forward to find a new spot.

It took over two hours for the reactor to extract a half-ton of hydrogen from the river, pumping it into an elastic gas bag—the reactor opened as needed like an origami box. When the expanding envelope was sauropod-sized, fifty meters long and twenty meters tall, Jake told the reactor to reel itself back to the campsite. The newborn blimp drifted over to hang above him, blocking out the setting sun. He sprayed the skin with metallic sealant, covering everything but the line of vents along the top and the transparent windows on the cabin-space.

Dusk brought more brontosaurian insects. Peg retreated to the campsite, where Jake set up a sonic field to keep the bugs at bay. He popped the pink champagne, pouring them both glasses.

Peg sniffed her drink. "I don't use alcohol at work. There *is* alcohol in this, isn't there?"

You betcha. Alcohol was an archaic vice. If Peg was an inexperienced drinker, he hoped the champagne went straight to her inhibitions. "But we have a ship to christen." Jake nodded toward the new fifty-meter airship floating above them, gleaming red and gold in the sunset.

"Christen?" She was still dubious.

"Sure. In the old days, they launched an airship by having a woman toast the ship with champagne, giving her a name."



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"Didn't the woman already have a name?"

"Yes, but she gave the *ship* a name as well—all ships are 'her' or 'she.' " Jake assumed Peg had never been aboard an airship. At Home, ships of any sort were a rarity. A person could work, live, play, even travel from Montana to Pluto, without ever entering a vehicle.

"Well, what shall I call it . . . I mean her?"

"I was thinking of *Challenger*. You know, after Professor Challenger and his Lost World—the great jungle plateau full of dinosaurs." He could see that she hadn't read Conan Doyle.

"Is that fiction?"

"Very much, but *we* are real. So why don't you name our ship?" Be a sport.

She took a deep sip, and smiled up at the dirigible. "I name you *Challenger*."

The little ritual had served its purpose—the bottle was open, Peg had loosened up. He made sure the glass in her hand stayed full. Next stop, the cozy fire.

Jake was not thigh-struck enough to light his romantic campfire right under thousands of cubic meters of explosive hydrogen. The stressed metal skin was *supposed* to stop sparks, leaks, lightning, and St. Elmo's Fire—but why chance spoiling the moment by being blown clear out of the Upper Cretaceous. He told the airship to go up a hundred meters. It hung in the last of the sunset, while Jake served up *risotto a la milanese*, with eggplant vinaigrette, and tofu szechwan in triple pepper sauce—simple safari fare.

As they ate, he heard crocs moving about by the river. Night birds cried. Things went thump and crunch in the brush. The Mesozoic night never seemed to get really quiet—too hot.

Jake cut his microamps, telling *Challenger* to watch for movement and illuminate the crocs. Then he settled in, shock-rifle on one side of him, Peg on the other.

Peg lay back against the pack saddle, fed and happy. She had put on a Crow gift shirt for dinner, fancier than Jake's—fringed buckskin, beaded with porcupine quills—but she left off the breechcloth and leather leggings.

Hitting the champagne, she gave his leg a playful whack, trying out some of his English, "The *fucking* Mesozoic. We're *here!* Aren't you amazed, excited, dumbfounded? Do you even *believe* it?"

His leg stung from the slap. Champagne was making her frisky. But Jake could take a bit of physical abuse from a woman—administered in the right spirit. "Damn well *feels* like we're here." He slid an arm around her waist.

Seeming not to notice his arm, she stared moodily into the sizzling night. "All except for the dinosaurs."

Right, no damned dinosaurs. He refilled her glass with his free arm, amused by her inebriated swings of mood.

*Challenger* beeped him. Crocs were moving down by the water. None



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were coming his way. He went back to admiring Peg's thigh and the dark hollow between her legs.

She smiled over her champagne, "I mean, aren't you disappointed?"

"Not yet." His hand closed on the hem of her shirt, pulling her closer. Curved flesh felt warm beneath the buckskin. She had a gymnast's body, taut and muscled.

Peg relaxed into him, saying nothing, wearing a dreamy, expectant look. A really *essential* look, one Time never touched. Jake had seen that look in the kohl-darkened eyes of one of Cleopatra's handmaids. He'd seen it shining across a dung fire in a yurt on the Camelback Steppe, beside the Sleeping Sands north of the Gobi. Jake had seen that exact look in a half-dozen centuries, on three habitable planets. Thank goodness it always meant the same thing. He and Peg were a millimeter away from foreplay.

*Challenger* beeped him again.

Jake checked the crocs—no change. Turning back, he found Peg's red-haired head resting on his shoulder, waiting, eyes wide, lips parted. Her freckled faced looked near perfect in the firelight. He leaned in to kiss her, sliding his hand under her hip for leverage.

Peg squealed, leaped up, lost balance, and sat back bare-assed on his hand, breathing hard and muttering, "Oh my, oh my . . ."

Staring at them from across the fire was a great, round yellow eye. The eye was set in a huge bony head, silhouetted by the night—half in shadow, half in light. Above the eye stood a horn as long as Jake was tall.

*Triceratops*. No 3V imaging, no mounted skeleton, no Feelie stimulation did the dinosaur justice. Imagine a four-legged beast, big as a bull elephant, with an armored head, three tremendous horns, and a terrible cutting beak. Picture this behemoth appearing out of blackness, without warning, when you are sitting by a night fire in a strange place, half-foxed on champagne, your hand stuck under someone else's butt. Jake was paralyzed.

And there were *more* of them. Immense six-ton bodies appeared on either side of the first, more wicked heads and horns. Hundreds were filling the dark wash, pushing toward the river.

Peg lunged forward to grab a recorder. Her tanned rear eclipsed the triceratops in front of Jake—but all thought of taking advantage of Peg had vanished. He yelled for *Challenger* to reel herself down the anchor line.

The ship did not come half fast enough. Clutching his shock-rifle, Jake watched powerful jaws crunch ginkgo and magnolia like broccoli. Were it not for his fire, the fleshy avalanche would have trod Peg and him into the hardpan. It could still happen. The dinosaurs being pushed toward the fire acted dangerously agitated. A sneeze now might start a stampede.

*Challenger*'s balloon tires touched down atop the anchor grapple. Flames cast dancing shadows on the dirigible's hull. Jake had forgotten



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the fire. He pictured half a ton of hydrogen gas exploding like a bomb in the midst of a triceratops herd—with him beneath it. The first Mesozoic expedition would be finished well ahead of schedule.

In a fever to get aloft, he heaved equipment into the cabin atop the reactor. Then he turned to Peg. She was sitting on her haunches, easy-as-you-please, panning the recorder, *totally* absorbed by the milling herd. He grabbed hold of the shoulder fringe on her Crow gift shirt, screaming, "Get aboard."

Peg's eyes shone clear and excited. "We found them!"

"Right, and this is too dangerous by half." Unshipping the nylon ladder, he shoved it into her hands.

Reluctantly, she stowed her recorder, climbing the ladder. Armored heads crowded closer. Any moment a horn might puncture the thin plasti-metal gas bag, releasing a torrent of flammable hydrogen. Jake dropped the shock-rifle, planted his hand on Peg's bottom, and shoved. "Put a wiggle on it!"

As he pushed Peg into the cabin Jake yelled to *Challenger*, "Up one hundred meters."

They shot skyward. Jake clung to the last rungs of the twisting ladder, watching the campfire shrink to a spark, surrounded by the shadowy backs and heads of the herd. Fumbling above the sea of spikes, he got a foot on the bottom rung, and swung back and forth, full of fright and exhilaration, ninety-odd meters above the hardpan. Perfectly safe as long as he did not let go.

"Aren't you coming up?" inquired a sweet intoxicated voice from above.

Without a word, Jake climbed the swaying ladder, tumbling into the lounge—the middle part of the cabin, with large entrance windows at either end—collapsing on the nonslip floor.

Peg hopped over him, full of alcoholic enthusiasm, trying to record from both ends of the lounge at once. Every so often, she ran over and shook him, with a bit of breathless news. "There are *hundreds* down there!"

A moment later she'd be back. "Make that *thousands!*"

Giggling hysterically, she tugged at him, "Come on, you have to *see* it." She had all the running lights on, illuminating the herd below.

"And juveniles. *Fucking* juveniles, moving with the herd." Then she would bound off again to lean out a window, only her legs and bottom in the cabin.

Jake had busted himself to pass the portal, find water, set up camp, get *Challenger* ready, start a fire, serve dinner, and seduce Peg. The moment he had her tipsy and in his arms, he'd been nearly trampled, dangled from a soaring airship, and come closer than he needed to being blown apart. All on a head full of champagne.

He decided he hadn't a hope of calming Peg down and sliding her into a double sleeping bag. Finding his bag and kit, he crawled off to the privacy of a barren stateroom, cursing all thousand triceratopses for their *pre-coitus interruptis*.


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Dawnlight angled in the stateroom window. Jake lay curled atop his sleeping bag, hammered by a vicious hangover. He'd forgotten how deadly sweet champagne was the next day. Peg padded back and forth in the lounge. Had she slept at all? Probably not. Groping about, he found his medikit, telling it to take away the pain. His head cleared. He felt not just better, but *good*. Last night's prize fiasco faded into a few not unfunny episodes; today had to be near perfect—just to balance the statistics. Cheered by that gambler's fallacy, he went to find Peg.

She was still wearing the fringed Crow shirt—her tired face full of heartless enthusiasm. "Have you *seen* them yet? They are ten times as thrilling by day!"

Easing back on the angle of attack, Jake gave her a professional greeting, and found the microstove, telling it to conjure up *café au lait*. He took a steaming cup into the cabin's glassed-in nose to gauge the day.

The day *was* magnificent. The fore and aft ends of the cabin area were completely transparent. Light and power poured through windows and floor. Jake sat amid blue limitless sky filled with towering white anvilheads. Green-brown flood plain snaked beneath him, coiling round islands of red earth. Mountains thrust up in the distance. He had his microamps pound out "Dawn Symphony."

The triceratops herd was truly awesome. Huge tawny bodies took up both sides of the river; moving, drinking, chewing up the greenery. Crocs had shifted to midstream to keep from being trampled.

He told the navcomputer to turn off the running lights, blazing uselessly in the daylight. Peg followed him into the glassed-in nose, constantly recording, shooting through the deck at their feet. "How long before we can get this ship moving?"

"Bored with dinosaurs already?" Jake noted dark circles under her bright eyes.

She waved in the direction the triceratops herd had come from. "It's essential to test the theory that carnivores will be trailing the herd."

He turned down "Dawn Symphony." Unwashed, circles under her eyes, wearing only a badly wrinkled buckskin shirt—Peg was every bit as stunning as he remembered. Of course, she *was* the only woman on the planet, the only one in all creation, for that matter, which accounted for at least 10 percent of her attraction. "I hate to move ship in this condition."

"What's wrong with it?" She glanced at the pristine galley and empty chartroom located behind the forward windows.

"Nothing's in place. Everything's piled where I tossed it last night. Lounge looks like a crash site." *Challenger*'s cabin was designed to give them breathing room. Lounge, galley, and chartroom formed a common area amidships. Twin staterooms aft were enclosed and independent. Fore and aft galleries gave each person a place to be alone with the vast landscape.



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Peg agreed. Before he could finish his coffee, she was clearing up the litter in the lounge and inflating collapsible furniture, hips bending and swaying as she worked. He decided she was not only a nerveless idiot with no sense of self-preservation, but also a shamelessly cheerful worker. Jake had no good reason to grouse. She finished off with yoga, moving to an inner music that needed no microamps. Her whole body sang. Peg was impossibly supple—chaste and naked at the same time.

Reeling *Challenger* down to the campsite, Jake hopped out for a final visit. Ashes formed a black scar on the dry wash, surrounded by bits and pieces left behind in the panic. A whole case of dehydrated paté had been mashed into the hardpan. The champagne bottle and glasses were ground to fine dust. Beside them was the gleaming stock of the shock-rifle. The rest of the weapon was gone, carried away between some thoughtless triceratops' toes.

An absolutely *fine* thing to forget! He had set the gun down in order to shove Peg up the ladder. Now they had *nothing* fit to take down a dinosaur. "Shock-rifle—missing," would raise a red flag in his report. Any weapon lost "out of period" was a headache. Debriefing would want *details*. He needed a better explanation than being caught in drunken panic with his hand on his partner's butt. Happily, debriefing was months away. A suitable explanation would turn up. Without a shock-rifle, he could easily be killed—then the problem would have solved itself.

Jake turned to piloting, something he fancied he did well. Compweb and navmatrix made *Challenger* an add-on to his central nervous system. Machinery leaped to his least command. Vague curiosity produced immediate data on buoyancy and windspeed. He released the anchor grapple, feeling the snap. *Challenger* rose silently upward. The reactor extended twin propellers. They were airborne.

Turning west, Jake climbed in huge steps toward the highlands, feeling the ship's balance as though the keel were a giant teeter-totter—anticipating trim changes, bracing for turns—flying a few tons heavy to maintain altitude aerodynamically instead of aerostatically. He relished the sense of control, and welcomed the challenge of translating Peg's instructions into something *Challenger* comprehended.

"Over there."

"Bearing two-nine-zero."

"A little to the left."

"Port five degrees."

"Closer."

"Down twenty meters."

He had Peg so pleased that she was running to the microstove to fetch him croissants and coffee, though the galley work was technically Jake's. As he suspected, Peg would put up with almost anything filed under WORK. Like many people who get good at what they do, she was eager to learn and not afraid to sweat. All he needed to do was to slip "sex" into her job description, then she would bang away with her customary enthusiastic efficiency. Coffee and croissants were a start.


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The uplands were flat, rolling country—drier than a bottle of fine wine. Carbon lines in Hell Creek rock showed these high plains suffered from flash fires. Farther west, Jake could make out the wavy blue line of the proto-Rockies, a massive cordillera; young, vibrant, with gnarled valleys and active volcanoes. Mountain chains were the true *terra incognita* of the Mesozoic, mist-shrouded and mysterious—leaving no fossil record, they could be home to anything; unsuspected species, outrageous monsters, alien civilizations. Compared to the Rockies, Hell Creek was comfortably familiar.

"There it *is*!" Peg pounded his shoulder, stabbing the air with her finger.

Jake looked down. Nothing showed below but sandhills, clay pan, and steep gullies, held together by conifer stands and primitive broadleaf trees. He had seen several tanklike ankylosaurs and a herd of bipedal boneheads—but no sign of the carnivores Peg claimed were shadowing the herds. He descended, flushing out a flock of yellow-brown ornithomimids that looked and ran like ostriches. Suddenly, at the end of Peg's finger, there was *T. Rex*.

Jake had always pictured the brute striding along, jaws agape, striking terror among decent law-abiding dinosaurs—but this one seemed to be asleep, sprawled on its side. Jake did a low pass and pirouette. Stretched out, the tyrannosaur was over thirteen meters long—nearly three times as big as the crocs that had worried him yesterday. The tyrant king did not even look up.

"We have to land." Peg was already half out the window. He suspected she wouldn't really feel she was *there* until she shared the ground with this great beast. So he dropped a grapple and anchor line, telling *Challenger* to reel herself down, keeping the ship "light," ready for a fast take-off. Then he slipped on his stunner holster, following Peg out the window.

Glare off the sandstone kicked in polarizers on his corneal lenses. The sleeping tyrannosaur had stood out like a small hill from the air, but the ground was a maze of dry wadis and cutbanks, divided by tall lanes of scrub and pines. Twenty meters, and they could no longer see the tyrannosaur, or the dead ground between them and the airship. If *T. Rex* decided to wake and stalk about, the carnosaur could appear anywhere. Jake's stunner felt like a flyswatter tucked under his armpit.

They came on the beast abruptly. One moment, the tyrannosaur was "somewhere over there." A minute later, Jake was nose to nose with the napping monster, its enormous bulk half-hidden by a shallow wash. Mottled black-and-tan coloring broke up the big beast's outline. Jake got an uncomfortably close view of great shearing jaws and saw-edged teeth. The boxy flat-sided head alone was bigger than he was, reeking of half-eaten meat.

Peg went down on one knee, recording, while Jake kept nervous watch. *Challenger* was not near enough to warn him if another carnosaur popped out of a neighboring gully.



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"Look at the ropes of muscle in those cheek bulges!" Peg was clearly in awe of the nasty creature. "I wish it would open its mouth; we'd get a better view of the teeth and interior attachments."

The tyrannosaur opened one eye, looking right at Peg.

"He knows we're talking about him," Jake whispered.

"Don't be a worrier. See that blood smeared on the premaxillaries? Probably sleeping off a kill. I doubt if we look much like a meal to him."

"Mere *hors d'oeuvres*." The ogre could down them like a pair of oysters, and the gore on its fangs was not reassuring.

"You *are* the nervous type, aren't you?"

"Not necessarily so." Every epoch had its burdens to bear. The fourteenth century had the Black Death; the twentieth had world wars and commercial TV. The bane of Jake's time and place was that people like Peg were too protected.

"This isn't a 3V or stimulation—everything here is *real*. Including *him*. Screw up, and no one's going to drag you out of that gullet."

The bony muscular head lifted up, turning snout and teeth toward them, stretching its powerful neck. Jake nearly jumped out of his leggings.

"Don't startle it." Peg held his stunner holster, keeping the gun from leaping out. Jake stopped breathing, staring at the tyrannosaur's evil grin.

The beast settled back, resting its chin nearer to them, seemingly more comfortable. The huge eye shut, shaded by its horny socket.

Just as Jake thought it was all over, Peg put down her recorder. She took two purposeful steps, leaned forward, and touched the horrible toothed head lightly on the snout.

The tyrannosaur snorted, nearly giving Jake a seizure.

Walking back over thorny wadis, under an unblinking sun, Peg explained, "That creature has no natural enemies, nothing to fear or defend against. If you are not afraid, or appetizing, you have nothing to fear from it."

He didn't argue. Maybe Peg was right; maybe she was merely insane. Either way Jake was not about to run back and pat *T. Rex* on the nose.

He settled for picking up a shed tooth, notched with wear and larger than his hand. The cutting edges had fine bevels, like a jeweler's saw.

In the scorching air of noon, Hell Creek lived up to its name. Even Peg wound down under the incandescent heat. Shocked at the way Peg wilted, Jake realized she probably had not rested in a day and a half. Feeling a flood of concern and fondness that was less than two-thirds lust, Jake took *Challenger* aloft, so that she could sleep in the swaying air-conditioned cabin.

The shimmering landscape cooled. Jake woke from his own noon sleep fresh enough to tackle tyrannosaurs—exactly what Peg intended. "Can you take me back to the river? To see how these carnivores handle the triceratops herd."

The navmatrix in his compweb let Jake retrace his every movement,


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never allowing him to get lost. Releasing the anchor grapple, he gave *Challenger* full port rudder, flying with up elevator, letting the terrain fall away beneath them.

Peg kept urging him, "Closer." Which meant venting hydrogen to get right down at the cypress tops.

The glassed-in forward gallery looked out on green-tan countryside, cut by a vast loop of the red mud river channel. Jake saw bathing triceratopses, big crocs, and duckbilled hadrosaurs. Farther off, the river branched out into flat delta country, a collage of blue bayous and cypress swamps. In the far, far distance, his boosted eyesight made out a blue horizon line merging with the sky—the Middle American Sea, a shallow arm of ocean filling the Mississippi valley, connecting the Gulf of Mexico to Hudson's Bay.

"Here come the carnivores." Peg pointed to the right. Jake applied starboard rudder and down elevator.

Sneaking along a deep creekbed was a smallish, longlegged tyrannosaurid, about the size of a walking killer whale. Peg identified the skulker, "*Albertosaurus megagracilis*—a stalker and sprinter. It'll hang about the herds trying to pick off a straggler or juvenile."

From a secure height, Jake liked the little fellow. *A. megagracilis* was rust-colored with brown spots, more compact and graceful than the tyrannosaur Peg had played tag with, but also faster, hungrier, and a greater threat to humans.

Peg pulled on the leggings and moccasins that went with the Crow gift shirt, not bothering with the long, trailing breechcloth. The result was a short fringed minidress over hip-length leather. "I want to go down there, close to the herd. To cover the action from ground level."

Jake was not ready for another walk on the Mesozoic wild side. It was late afternoon. In the cooling half-light, carnivores were bound to be more active and dangerous.

"Oh, *you* can stay up here. We'll combine ground recordings with a wide-angle aerial sequence." She panned her recorder. "Here come more carnivores! A whole hunting pack!"

Jake looked the newcomers over; they were taller than *A. megagracilis*, chunkier too. Full-sized tyrannosaurids. A half-dozen black-and-tan boys (or gals) out to raise hell among the herbivores. They did not stalk the creekbeds, but ambled right toward the river, not caring who saw them coming.

Jake had seen this dance of death before, on the steppes of Central Asia, on the plains below Kilimanjaro. Carnivores approached casually from downwind. The herd edged slowly upwind to keep from being ambushed, maintaining a healthy separation. Neither hunter nor victim moved too quickly—neither wanted to exhaust their reserves. In the ultimate rush, a labored breath might make all the difference.

And Peg itched to be in the middle of it. Jake began to question the wisdom of picking an active young paleontologist who had never seen a battery of carnivore teeth outside of a fossil formation.



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He set down on the leeward periphery of the herd, giving her a comlink to clip to her ear. "Take this *little fucker* with you."

*"Little fucker?"* English confused her again.

"Technical term. Just keep the link open."

Slipping the comlink into her ear, she swaggered off toward the brush, showing long sweeps of thigh between the slits in her shirt and the tops of her leggings. Jake hoped this was not his last look at her.

Fighting a crosswind, he kept *Challenger* positioned almost directly above Peg. *A. megagracilis* still worried Jake the most—but he had lost the cheetah-like stalker in the rough, and did not have time to hunt him up.

"How does it look? I have the herd in sight." Microamps made Peg sound like a flea in his ear.

"*A. megagracilis* is missing. Those big tyrannosaurs are moving in line ahead, a couple of kilometers downwind." Jake judged that the big ones were getting ready for a run in. The triceratopses thought so too. They were shifting their young into the herd center. Adults turned their horns toward the approaching carnivores, swiveling on their short front legs.

A game of bait and bluff began. Nature's ballet of death is never all-out battle. No carnosaur was going to charge into a hedge of horns. And no right-minded triceratops wanted to be separated from the retreating herd, singled out for slaughter. Heroism is not an herbivore survival trait.

"What's happening?" Stuck in the brush, Peg was missing everything. So much for being *on the scene.*

"Tyrannosaurs are fanning out, trying to turn a flank."

Defenseless duckbills scattered for the brush along the river.

"I'm heading over there."

"Don't get stepped on."

At that instant, something spooked the herd—maybe the flanking tactics, maybe the bolting duckbills. For whatever reason, the triceratopses got the wind up and thundered downriver, tyrannosaurs sprinting at their heels. Thousand of elephant-sized dinosaurs stampeded at top speed, heads down and tails up, sides heaving. Even larger tyrannosaurs dashed in among them, slashing and snarling, attempting to cut down a victim while running flat-out, meters ahead of the horns.

Death in the afternoon. Near-indescribable nightmare. The only thing Jake could compare it with was a breakneck Lakota buffalo hunt. The dust-covered tyrannosaurs reminded him of Crazy Horse and Company, whooping in to make their kills.

Only this time they missed. Perhaps the horns came too close or the herd broke too soon, maybe it was all a feint—for whatever reason, the carnivores rolled out and regrouped.

Peg missed it all. "I can see the dust raised by the herd, but where are the tyrannosaurs?"

"They rolled right, half a kilometer short of you." A good thing, too.

"I'm going to work my way up this dry wash, staying to leeward of the herd." The wash was a flood channel connecting two loops of the river, a shortcut that let Peg keep abreast of the frightened herd.


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Jake acknowledged, dipping down to scout the wash, looking for that sneaky culprit *A. megagracilis*, but the fast little bastard might be anywhere by now.

A setting sun cast long, confusing shadows. Duckbills crouched like great frightened lizards in the greenery. The triceratops herd caught its collective breath. Rearmost adults turned, peering back into the dust, keeping a horned eye out for the pursuing tyrannosaur pack.

*Challenger* beeped him.

"Oh, I see them now!" Peg hooted with triumph. "Here they come!"

*"Who? Where?"* Jake turned back to her. His jaw fell. Both he and the herd had been fooled. Under cover of dust and half-light, the tyrannosaurs had wheeled, shifting from line ahead to line abreast. Using Peg's shortcut, they were starting another run smack at the middle of the shaken herd, aiming to split it into two panicked segments.

Right in their path, Peg scrambled out of the wash, lying prone on the cutbank, her recorder running. Idiot luck had put her between the herd and the line of oncoming carnivores. Six frenzied tyrannosaurs rushed at her out of the twilight, teeth gleaming, tails straight, clawed feet chewing up the clay pan. For an awful instant, Jake saw her insanely refusing to move.

The wave of claws, teeth, and muscle swept over her, and her comlink went dead.

*Seeing the Sauropod*

Jake's job made him a generalist, but he did imagine himself a specialist on Time—Newtonian Time, post-Einsteinian Time, non-Euclidean Time. He had even yawned through an endless lecture by Plato on the subject. His navmatrix gave him a hyperlight time-sense that could carve days down to milliseconds or stretch them over millennia, never missing a click of the cosmic clock. The instant Peg disappeared beneath the charging carnivores, Jake started counting nanoseconds—screaming for *Challenger* to land.

He knew that what was left of Peg needed immediate life-support. A body *could* be regenerated. Bit by bit if need be. But nerve cells were slippery cases. As they died, they took with them the memories that made Peg who she was. Brain dead was dead.

He was out of the cabin before *Challenger* touched down, vaulting through a forward window, hitting the ground sprinting, medikit in hand.

Jake calculated he could have Peg on life-support in seconds. Minutes would put her at the portal. But on the far end of the portal, real medical care was still centuries off. There was no direct connection between the Uppermost Cretaceous and Home. At the other end of the Hell Creek anomaly, medicine was still in the business of killing patients—cut-and-stitch butchery done by buffoons in disease-ridden hospitals. Surgeons


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*paid by the limb* spent their odd hours denouncing public health and germ theory.

As he ran, his mind searched calmly for ways to push time back, to retrieve minutes, even seconds—to recapture the instant before this all happened. In theory, FTL made it possible to pull Peg out *before the tyrannosaurs hit her.* In well-traveled historical periods, STOP teams routinely performed impossible rescues.

Not here though, not now. The Hell Creek anomaly was too new, so poorly mapped that Peg had worried about being in the Paleocene instead of the Mesozoic. A STOP team could not count on hitting the right millennium, much less the right moment. But if he could get her through the portal to a historic period—a STOP team could be waiting. That was Peg's ticket to an autodoc.

Simultaneously, Jake cursed himself for letting Peg wander about guided only by her daft death wish. He was despicable, a fool, doing his job with a hard-on, so obsessed with bedding Peg he had given in to her suicidal whims.

Leaping over the crumpled lip of the wadi, he steeled himself for his first look at her. So much depended on what shape she was in. What he had to work with. What was *left.*

Peg was sitting calmly, covered with dirt, elbows propped on her knees, recording the disappearing tyrannosaurs. Jake hit badly, doing a perfect pratfall.

She turned, startled by his impact. "Are you hurt? It's good you brought a medikit."

Taking the kit from his nerveless fingers, she was all over him, checking for injuries, helping him sit up, making him feel twelve times worse. "Did you see the tyrannosaurids? That was a truly essential moment—they galloped right over me!"

He sat there, stunned, saying nothing—flooded with relief and anger, feeling all the guilt and rottenness turn to cold, hard fury.

"Feel better?" Her smile aimed at being helpful. "Could you look for my comlink? I think you landed on it. The *little fucker* flicked out in the fall."

Jake was wired to explode. But he had to *work* with this brainless waif. He dug her comlink out of the dirt under him and slapped it into her palm, replying as diplomatically as possible, "If you are dead set on suicide, please do it on your *own* damn time, and have the decency to leave a note so mere bystanders won't be blamed."

Peg looked at him cooly. "Don't be anal. Ever since passing the portal, you have been in a testosterone frenzy—pawing me by the fire, bounding about saving me, making a farce out of a serious expedition."

He tried to argue, but her tone just turned huffy and academic. "Do you have *any* notion what the stride length of a tyrannosaur is?"

"*Damned* large, like the rest of him."

"Running flat-out—four to five meters. All I needed do was drop down, and they sailed right over me." Peg pointed to the first three-toed gouge,


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meters away in the middle of the streambed. One stride would have cleared a small ground car.

"Stop thinking with your gonads. I was never in any danger. Basic carnivore behavior says that no seven-ton carnosaur chasing a six-ton herbivore is going to stop to bother with a fifty-kilo person in its path."

She gave him a concerned look. "You are *so* edgy. It's a surprise FTL picked you for this."

Jake said nothing, knowing too well why he was here. FTL hadn't picked him—he had picked *Peg*, snapping up her and her Mesozoic project like a lovesick teen.

Cultural, academic, and entertainment institutions—as well as interested individuals—submitted field work proposals to FTL, which Faster Than Light filled at whim. Only STOP missions had instant priority. Cultural-scientific importance was meant to play some vague role in selection, but the real criterion was what veteran field agents thought they could accomplish. No one could be forced through a portal, and attrition was high, especially among first-timers. Field agents regularly succumbed to portal skips, excitable natives, and primitive medical beliefs. The stupid or gullible didn't last long. Trips that looked too dangerous, or too trivial, had no chance of happening.

Senior agents were free to argue for promising assignments, and Jake had his own system for scouting fresh projects. Locking himself in his Syrtis Major studio, he would order up a pot of coffee and a pipe of opium. Properly blasted, he would then have Biofile send him the open cases one at a time.

*Everybody* was there—the good, the ugly, and the merely impossible. People wanted a word with long dead relatives. . . . Psychics needed predictions tested. . . . A Ph.D. at Tehran U. wanted to shoot some Persian history in fourth century BC Mesopotamia. . . . SAVE THE CHRISTIAN MARTYRS had a long list of worthies they wanted plucked from the flames. THE JEWISH COMMITTEE TO EXPOSE THE SAINTS had an even *longer* list of worthies whose reputations they wanted blackened (and whom they wanted brought back to the future for trial). An *el grosso* Feelie mogul needed background for a porno mini-epic on the Marquis de Sade. *Then* came the cranks and the crazies. . . .

How to decide among so many admirable requests? Jake's opium-logged brain had not even tried. Peg and her Mesozoic proposal put everything else on hold. He must have replayed her proposal a dozen times, puffing on the opium pipe, getting every nuance of her voice, person, and presentation.

Her listings were incredible: Cuvier Fellow at the University of Paris at twenty-six . . . French, Latin, Classical Greek . . . swimming, yoga, aikido . . . Phi Beta Kappa, no criminal record . . . Reformed Vegetarian and practicing nudist. Endorsements by everyone from the World Paleontological Congress to the Teen Lesbians. A bright, well-balanced young professional, out to put her mark on the planet. Perfect. A field agent's prayer. Where could Jake go wrong?


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The results had him doubting the wisdom of making crucial decisions while in an opium stupor. But even his sober brain had failed to see the flaws. Uppermost Mesozoic was a brand-new period—further back than ever before, a high-risk, high-opportunity assignment Jake could *not* pass on, not if he wanted to stay at the cutting edge. Whoever came back from the Upper Cretaceous would *own* FTL.

Unless he fucked up. FTL was infamously unforgiving. Faster Than Light had an army of active agents, and files filled with wanna-bees; its ingratitude was boundless. One bad bounce, and Jake was out. FTL trips were too troublesome and expensive for failure. If you screwed the pooch in some godawful corner of the past, the agency advised you to *marry* that pooch and learn to farm—for surely there was no point in coming back.

Sitting in the dogwood-shaded wash, listening to Peg explain what a dolt he was, Jake thought about how he *had* to succeed. Hell, he had to *excel*. Picking a crazed partner because you wanted to fuck her did not justify failure, not to FTL. He tried to decide what would work best with Peg, contrite apology or a vicious tongue-lashing.

*Challenger* beeped him.

With a bang and a crash, the brush parted. *A. megagracilis* burst out of the magnolias. Jake recognized the rust-brown spots and the cleaner, smaller, more gracile variation on the basic tyrannosaurid build. There was no way to measure stride length, but the carnivore was going at least twice as fast as Jake could.

Nerves shot, Jake suppressed a shriek, calling for his stunner. He thrust his hand into an empty armpit. No holster handed him a weapon. He had hopped out of *Challenger* carrying nothing more deadly than a medikit. If this long-legged tyrannosaurid had a toothache or a broken toe, Jake could handle it—otherwise, he was caught short.

Fifty meters upwind, a juvenile duckbill broke cover. Squawking in horror, the duckbill bolted from a four-legged crouch into biped flight. The two-ton dinosaur's green-and-black coloring, like old-fashioned camouflage, had made it nearly invisible among the ferns and dogwoods. Megagracilis must have smelled out the baby duckbill, because the tyrannosaurid showed no surprise, springing right for the spot where the duckbill emerged.

Seeing death coming, the terrified duckbill cut right. The tyrannosaurid cut even tighter, turning inside the bawling herbivore. They collided in a spray of dirt and gravel. Godzilla meets Baby Huey. Mercifully, it was quick.

Megagracilis got its jaws around the duckbill's neck, biting down. The duckbill's eyes bulged in terror. Slowly its thrashing subsided as *A. megagracilis* started to feed.

Jake sat rigid, so tense his muscles had set. Peg was right. To these terrible giants, two humans were a pair of odd bumps on the landscape. Insignificant bugs. While he and Peg argued, a game of eat and be eaten had gone on. Megagracilis had smelled out the hiding duckbill. The poor


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herbivore had watched death stalk closer, panicking at the last instant. Neither had paid the least attention to the humans. Very deflating.

A glance at Peg was even more deflating. She was on her feet, shooting each slice of flesh as it came off the duckbill. The look on her face was otherworldly, completely relaxed—not smiling, not happy, merely transported. By picking this young paleontologist, he had handed her the adventure of her life, an adventure at once astounding, romantic, professional, and damned near to orgasmic—an epic in which Jake himself was only a poorly written stanza, as necessary as the reactor, but certainly no more important.

Jake was just cynical enough to consider using that truth. He could point out to Peg that if it were not for *him*, then *she* would not be *here*. Jake was cynical enough to think it, but too proud to *say* it. He was not going to grovel.

He liked thinking of himself as witty, handsome, and as brave as he needed to be. Peg put a strain on that self-esteem. So it was time to give his libido a rest. Maybe they would *not* make love, but they would *damn* well work together. No more loose adventuring, waiting for lightning to strike. *Gung Ho*, or no go. What he needed was a plan, something he could hold Peg to when she veered off on her next tangent.

Telling the navcomputer to illuminate the darkening wadi, he trotted back to the *Challenger*, slipped on his shoulder holster and ordered an Irish coffee from the microstove. Mug in hand, he walked back to the wash to watch *A. megagracilis* demolish dinner.

Coffee and whiskey had just the right bite for his mood, and he got back in time to witness a tail-lashing feeding frenzy. Two of the larger tyrannosaurids came strutting back from the bend in the river. Perhaps this pair had missed their kills. Perhaps the pack had had a falling-out. In any event, the big tyrannosaurids decided that a baby duckbill would do nicely. There was some snapping and snarling as *A. megagracilis* made a pretense of asserting property rights. The smaller carnivore was too quick to be hurt badly, but the outcome was never in doubt. The two tyrannosaurs settled down to a thieves' banquet. Megagracilis slunk off to hunt up another duckbill.

Jake saw a lesson in this. Megagracilis was a specialist, a speedy killer of small duckbills. Much as Jake admired its compact lines and well-honed technique, Jake was glad to be a generalist. The two tyrannosaurs were generalists—big enough to tackle a triceratops, but not too big to scavenge. Given enough time, generalists always won. Or so Jake hoped.

Peg, snub nose stuck in her view finder, was the specialist *par excellence*.

They walked back to *Challenger* together. Peg tossed her recorder on the chart table, propping moccasined feet beside it. "A totally essential day. I'm thrilled, famished, and exhausted—in about that order."

She produced a huge shed tooth, pushing it toward Jake. "For your collection." A peace offering. Dinosaurs shed their worn teeth, so tremendous canines weren't rare, but Peg seemed eager to make amends, to *be sociable*, despite a gritty weariness in the corners of her eyes.



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Jake was touched. He served up mushroom moussaka and cabbage borscht, accompanied by a favorite Moselle. Outside, snapping bones added to the night noises as great crunching jaws broke up the last of the duckbill.

Peg nodded toward the darkening night, "Giant carniovres are nice enough, in their bloody fashion, but I still want to see sauropods."

Sauropods again. She had mentioned them the first day. Jake knew that these brontosaur-type, long-necked herbivores were the ultimate in dinosaurs—twenty to thirty meters long, weighing as much as a hundred tons.

Peg's sleepy eyes glowed. "Sauropods are essential to this expedition, essential to the extinction question. Essential to *everything*."

"We're unlikely to find them here in Hell Creek," he pointed out.

She shrugged, "FTL picked Hell Creek. *I* wanted to go straight to the Morrison Formation."

"Upper Cretaceous is as far as the anomaly goes." Jake smiled. Peg's overspecialization was showing; she was weak on Wormhole Theory. *Jake* was the one who had turned her original proposal into something workable. Morrison Formation was Late Jurassic, maybe eighty million years further back.

The Mesozoic was gigantic. He and Peg had only broken the surface. *T. Rex* was closer in time to human civilization than it was to brontosaurus and the Great Age of the Sauropods. Jake had brought them in as close as he dared to the mysterious KT boundary that marked the Cretaceous extinction, figuring that the end is never a bad place to start. Success here meant that they could look for other anomalies, going father back, seeing more.

But Peg wanted to see it all *now*. "What we have here in Hell Creek is an explosion of new types: tyrannosaurids, triceratopses, boneheads, ankylosaurs, and advanced duckbills. Evolution in fast-forward. But it's essential to know what is happening to older types as well, and sauropods are some of the oldest."

Jake admitted that he wasn't a paleontologist, but he swore he could *feel* the great extinction coming. Hell Creek dinosaurs looked healthy enough—at petting range, *T. Rex* was frighteningly impressive—but there was a frantic quality to dinosaur life he didn't see in the crocs and fisher-storks. The net connecting life to life hummed with tension.

"Sure, I've seen it too." Peg catalogued the symptoms: "Carnosaurs forced to squabble over kills. Triceratops herds surging across the landscape, searching for water and sustenance. Poor harassed duckbills unable to protect their offspring."

Jake put in his pitch for generalism. "Aside from the ostrich-types, there are no hordes of small dinosaurs. No tiny generalists waiting to take over if the big boys falter."

Peg shook her head. "The whole show is propped atop the food chain." One day something would hit the props hard—the crash would be tremendous. Even as they talked, world calamity hurtled through space-time toward Earth. "But that's why sauropods are so *basic*. They are well


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established herbivores, who have *already* survived numerous extinctions and cosmic collisions."

Jake liked the notion of a sauropod hunt. The long-necked herbivores were huge but relatively harmless, unless they stepped on you. Seeing a sauropod was such a sane ambition, compared to playing tag with tyrannosaurids. "So, where could we find large sauropods in the Uppermost Cretaceous?"

"Maybe in the Highlands; certainly in South America."

Enjoying her enthusiasm, Jake had *Challenger* project maps of fossil finds onto the chart table. The maps reminded him of the charts that pretended to describe nineteenth century Africa. Fossils formed where sediments were being laid down, so the maps showed coastlines, river deltas, floodplains, and the like. Continental interiors were great blank areas.

Peg dismissed the Euramerican sauropods, "So-called *titanosaurs*, they hardly live up to their name. Not much bigger than duckbills." Euramerican predators were also small to medium—megalosaurs and dryptosaurs. *T. Rex* would have roared through them like a lion at a poodle show. Much of Europe was just plain underwater. Eastern North America, Greenland, and Scandinavia were united into Euramerica—but Southern Europe was a string of semi-arid islands, some inhabited by dwarf dinosaurs a couple of meters long, quaint rather than impressive. Peg did not have time for evolutionary U-turns.

Jake suggested that they ride the prevailing westerlies south and east, at least as far as North Africa. The Sahara was supposed to be a green tropical expanse, connected to Euramerica by the Spanish Isles.

Peg shook her head. "West Africa will have more of those misnamed titanosaurs—bigger than the ones in Euramerica, but not by much. We can look in on them later, on our way to India." India was another huge blank spot, as mysterious as in the days before de Gama, thought to be terribly exotic—perhaps an island, perhaps attached to Africa.

She wanted to go straight to South America, even though it meant flying through the teeth of the megathermal, and the tropical storm belt. "There we are sure to see *real* sauropods."

Jake weighed the iffy weather, then agreed. He would cheerfully face a dozen tropical cyclones if he did not have to endure another tyrannosaur chase.

Feeling like they had finally arrived, he took *Challenger* aloft for the night. In his evening systems check, he noted Peg's recorder was drawing minimum power, on hold at the end of a file. She must have fallen asleep reviewing data.

Curious, he interfaced with the recorder through its power intake, telling his compweb to break any encryption. The recorder code was a simple digital transformation, keyed to Peg's birth date—putting PEG with BIRTHDAY brought the date out of memory. The deciphered image went straight to Jake's optical lobe.

He was surprised by a familiar purple-blue sky. White vapor streaked


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the ruddy horizon. The recording had to come from Home; the image was not from the Mesozoic. It was not even from Earth.

Frozen in the 3V foreground was a group of teenage girls—young, gawky, big-eyed—leaning on each other, tired and triumphant. They wore respirators and altitude suits, but had doffed their masks for the recording. Thin lips were blue from cold and lack of oxygen. They were on Mars, the western summit of *Olympus Mons*; Jake recognized the red ochre *Amazonis Planitia* in the background.

Olympus Summit was a typical tourist destination, but these weren't typical tourists. *They had climbed the sucker*, the biggest mountain on a habitable planet. You could see the incredible hike in the girls' faces.

And Peg was in the middle—very adult, very in charge.

Of course. Teen Lesbians. She was probably a Pack Mother or something. Her proud look, backed by the Plain of Amazons, explained part of his problem.

Next morning they scouted the proto-Rockies, finding dense impenetrable forest. Peg thought the highlands might hold large sauropods. Jake did not disagree, "There might be ultrasaurs down there, or lost cities, or leprechauns, but the only way to know is to tether *Challenger* to a tree and blunder about on foot—two people and no shock-rifle. The sauropods of the Rockies will have to wait."

Bayou country came next; lower, swampier, opened by waterways. Jake played cajun tunes in his head, while Peg catalogued flora and fauna from the air. "Swamp cypress, cycads, tall stands of fir and pines . . ." They spotted a pack of small tyrannosaurids—*Albertosaurus lancensis*, Peg thought, but she could not be sure without seeing teeth and other internal parts. Nothing remotely resembled a sauropod.

Then came the sea. Green-white shorebreak. Blue water. Reefs and atolls. *Challenger* descended to top off the water ballast and fill the hydrogen cells. Peg took sea water samples and swam nude inside a reef. Small-toothed shore birds wheeled above.

Leaving balmy Montana, they sailed south and east along the Dakota shoreline. Kansas was completely underwater. Peg sat on the transparent cabin deck, shooting straight down to the sandy sea bottom, picking out marine reptiles, twelve-to-sixteen meter plesiosaurs, long-necked versions of the Loch Ness monster. She still worked in the nude aboard ship—but that had become mere entertainment. Jake admired her yoga positions over breakfast, then relaxed into his role of flying chauffeur.

He swung far enough east to sight the Euramerican shore, seeing duckbills in the Alabama swamps. "Alabama Song" played in his head as he set a mental course for South America. He flew in bright sunshine alongside immense flocks of long-legged ducks, as big as flamingos.

This part of the trip was like coming home. Jake had learned airship technique in the twentieth century aboard the original *Graf Zeppelin*, working as a rigger for *Lufthansa* on the South America run—Frankfurt to Recife to Rio, then back to Germany by way of Seville. That was when Rio *was* Rio, not just another branch of Megapolis. He remembered


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fevered nights full of music, women, and *mardi gras*, with Nazi reichsmarks burning a hole in his pocket. Not a bad time and place—between the world wars and before the AIDs pandemic—unless you were poor, or perhaps a Jew. He rummaged through his music files for a samba, or maybe the Bolero.

By now they were in the megathermal, the fevered blanket circling the waist of the planet—a perpetual steambath with temperatures in the wet 100s. Everything was sopping. Decks and bulkheads sweated. Pillows turned to warm sponges. Buckskin came apart in soggy clumps. Jake took to wearing only light cotton pants; anything more was intolerable.

Approaching the equatorial trough, wind died to a whisper. Depressed by the heavy air of the doldrums, Jake dumped ballast and headed farther out to sea, hoping that the higher marine air would be cooler. A mere ribbon of water separated South America from Asiamerica and Africa, a seaway too small to be called the South Atlantic. The fishlike shadow of the airship swam over the waves.

Weather radar noted convective turbulence, an easterly wave of low pressure signaling a weak equatorial low.

Peg stood, recorder ready, anxious for her first glimpse of South America and its sauropods. After tracking them across two continents, her eagerness was easy to see. Jake decided that as soon as they found a decent-sized sauropod, he was going to hit on her again—catch her in a paleontological frenzy, and anything was possible.

Tall anvilheads reared before them, a fluffy colonnade leading up to Olympus. High sea-surface temperatures created warming unstable air masses. Typhoon weather, with storm pillars ten kilometers high.

Seeing a gap, Jake shot for blue sky and blue water, hoping to put the emerging storm cells behind him.

More white patches appeared ahead, boiling rags of mist that swelled rapidly into cottony thunderheads, roots gray with rain. Peg was disappointed to find the horizon clouding up. "I cannot get a clear view of the coast."

Not surprising. Weather was closing in from all sides. The barometer tumbled into freefall. For the first time, *Challenger* fought terrific headwinds. Rain spattered in the open window; fat searing drops hit Jake in the face.

Shielding her eyes with her viewfinder, Peg announced, "I see a black line to the south."

"That's the coast." He watched her turn to maximum magnification. In this thickening storm, she had as much chance of sighting Rio as she did of seeing a sauropod.

"It isn't getting any closer."

Jake nodded. "This south-east headwind is a *bastard*. Maximum revolutions and ground speed is *falling*."

"Is that possible?"

"I would not have thought so an hour ago. But it's happening."



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*Challenger*'s twin propellers were churning at peak revolutions without gaining a meter. The headwind had topped 160 kilometers per hour. Strain on the ship was transmitted to Jake as a line of tension along his spine, humming from head to buttocks.

Peg complained that South America was slipping away. At last, she let her recorder fall. "It's gone. Nothing but gray skies and gray wave caps." They were being blown backward by gale-force winds.

*Red Woman is the first woman. Like Coyote, she has always been with us, doing much that is bad and some that is good.*
*—Pretty Shield, Crow Medicine woman and wife to Goes Ahead, Custer's scout.*

*Red Woman*

The storm seized them with astonishing speed. Inrushing winds immobolized *Challenger*. Radar reported ominous rings of cumulonimbus spreading through dense stratiform clouds—the signature of a truly intense cyclonic storm. A hurricane was being born around them.

Jake stole a glance at Peg. She did not look worried—nothing new there. As much as he admired her fine brain, Peg did not have the sense to be scared. Mesozoic weather was advertised as mild. At Home, cyclonic storms had long been tamed; satellites seeded them from orbit to remove energy as rain and limit crop damage. Aside from the unwary sailing buff, people simply avoided storms. No one except suicide cases went ballooning about in a typhoon.

But Jake had been through horrible blows before—rounding the Horn under hatches aboard a tea clipper, and clinging to the mast of a leaky Athenian coaster off Cape Matapan. He *knew* what it was like to have life hang at the whim of wind and sea. It was a lesson he did not need replayed.

Lightning scrawled across the sky, connecting thunderheads. A thermal tugged at the airship. Jake applied maximum down elevator, to keep *Challenger* below her pressure height. He did not want to vent hydrogen in a thunderstorm. The column of valved gas could act as a conductor, drawing lightning straight to the ship.

"There must be excess power in the reactor." Peg was still set on seeing the sauropods of South America.

"Sure, the props could rip the reactor right off the hull. Wouldn't help us much." They had to run before the storm. He reduced power on the port propellor, using starboard rudder to bring the airship about.

*Challenger* struggled to obey. Headwinds beat at the control surfaces. Staggered by the buffeting, *Challenger* was blown sideways, then leaped ahead like a sprinting sauropod. Ground speed zoomed from less than zero to several hundred kilometers per hour.

Peg observed the transition with calm interest. "Where are we headed now?"


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"Most likely north by northwest." So near the center of the swirling cloud mass, winds shifted too rapidly to give a steady course.

Rain beat against the cabin, blotting out the sunlight. Windows closed. Interior lights winked on. Jake ordered a pot of coffee from the microstove. He started to pour, bracing himself against the heave of the storm.

*Challenger* shot upward, flinging hot coffee on Jake, Peg, and the surrounding bulkheads.

Yelling for more power and down elevator, Jake snagged a window frame with one hand and Peg with the other, keeping her from flying through the galley into the lounge. The ship continued to rise, sucked up at a sickening angle.

Jammed against Peg, with only wet coffee between them, Jake felt compelled to make conversation. "We're caught in a convection cell!"

She nodded, eyes wide and staring.

*Challenger* started giving the altitude in hundred meter steps as they neared pressure height, "Eight hundred meters, nine hundred meters, a thousand . . ."

"At twelve hundred meters, we'll reach pressure height, and have to valve hydrogen, or the gas cells will rupture." His explanation sounded absurdly calm even to him.

"Pressure height," announced *Challenger*. "Butterfly valves opening."

Feeling hydrogen gush from the ship, Jake ordered down elevator. The stall alarm rang in his head, but still they kept rising, borne aloft by a rushing bubble of air.

" . . . fifteen hundred meters, sixteen hundred meters . . ."

More hydrogen spewed into the storm.

". . . twenty-three hundred meters, twenty-four hundred meters, twenty-five hundred meters . . ."

They could defy gravity only so long. "Brace yourself." He held harder to Peg.

At more than twice its pressure height, the airship lurched to a stop. They teetered for several seconds. Then *Challenger* plunged into the boiling darkness.

"Dump ballast," Jake kept his lips tight, voicing the command in his head. Why show Peg how scared he was? Water ballast streamed from the ship. But now they were caught in a downdraft; deflating cells sucked air into the hull, offsetting the loss of water, threatening an oxyhydrogen explosion.

"Look, the ocean." Peg pointed. Rain-swept waves appeared as they plummeted through the bottom cloud layer.

*Challenger* righted herself so close to the whitecaps that Jake could see spray flying from the chop. She began to climb immediately.

Jake ordered added power and down elevator to counteract the climb. Each wild oscillation cost him both gas and ballast. The airship threatened to yo-yo until they lost all buoyancy and plunged into the sea.

Fresh water and hydrogen were all around him, but Jake had no notion of touching down to refill the tanks. Wind force had to be fearsome.



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He saw waterspouts, a conga line of twisters sweeping over the waves. Lightning struck the ship with alarming regularity.

A year or so before Jake shipped on the *Graf*, an American helium airship, the *Akron*, stronger and heavier than *Challenger*, touched down in seas milder than these. Three survivors were plucked from the Atlantic. Admiral Moffett and seventy-odd others went down with the ship, and so did a smaller airship sent to find them. Not enviable odds. And here there were no rescue ships. Jake didn't like their chances of flagging a ride on a passing plesiosaur.

Altitude figures started to tumble. Another wet downdraft had *Challenger* headed for the wavecaps.

"Prepare for ditch procedure," the airship advised in a disinterested monotone. "Your lounge chairs double as life rafts."

Jake clutched the window frame, staring at Peg. "Maximum power. Up elevator." He could not see them riding out a typhoon in lounge chairs.

"Ditch procedure," repeated the ship. Emergency circuits had made their heartless calculations. "Warm water ditching. Remove excess clothing. Place your head between your knees."

Jake tuned *Challenger* out. He had played all his cards but one. Water ballast. Elevators. Reactor power. Still the rainswept sea was only meters away. Jake wanted to escape, but he'd have to settle for a stay of execution.

"Jettison reactor."

Propellers whirling, the reactor detached itself, plunging into the wavetops.

An almighty surge lifted them up. Lightened by the loss of the reactor, *Challenger* shot skyward, reeling off new altitude numbers, "Six hundred, seven hundred, eight hundred meters . . ."

"What happened?" Peg sounded like she'd fully expected to get wet.

"I dumped the reactor."

"Won't we need it later?"

"It was that or touch down in berserk seas." Compared to the reactor, provisions and inflated furniture did not mass enough to matter.

*Challenger* tore through her old pressure height, ". . . twelve hundred, thirteen hundred, fourteen hundred meters."

At over two thousand meters they leveled off. Wind speed fell. The nonslip deck felt firmer now that they were free ballooning, no longer fighting the storm.

Jake let go of Peg and the window, walking slowly over to the microstove. Ordering a light lunch, he took it into the lounge. Water beaded on the windows.

Peg followed him. "What now?"

"*Souffle aux blancs d'oeufs*. And the last of that Moselle. No sense saving good wine for after the crash."

"Crash?"

"When the hurricane hits the coast of Asiamerica, we have to bring


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*Challenger* down." Unless they missed Asiamerica. He pictured them shooting the gap between the two continents, sailing out into the near-limitless Pacific. That would pretty much match his luck.

"How bad do you expect it to be?" Peg asked the question casually, as though it hardly involved her.

"Only been in one airship bang-up. Aboard the *Graf Zeppelin*, returning to Pernambuco from Rio, we hit a heavy tropical squall a hundred meters above the field. Drove us right down to the deck." Remembering that nauseating crunch made him shiver. "We lost a rudder and came down hard on some poor Brazilian's shanty. Rammed the chimney right into the *Graf*'s hull. Breakfast was cooking, so smoke and sparks poured over tons of hydrogen and fuel gas."

He shook his head thoughtfully, "We'd have been blown back to Frankfurt, but an on-the-ball mechanic leaped out of his gondola and dashed in the front door of the shack. He grabbed a pot of coffee off the stove and put out the fire." Zeppelin crews were the best, one reason Jake had trained with them.

Peg smiled at the story. Jake did not add that it was the sort of luck you could not count on twice. Over *café au lait*, he considered making a final stab at seducing Peg. But it would be only out of a sense of duty. The line he had been saying, *"look, I got you here"* was now wildly inappropriate.

Night fell. They dozed in their respective armchairs, behind black rain-streaked windows.

Near to dawn, Jake awoke. Light showed in the east. Thunderheads towered over a stratiform cloud plain—not a day for yoga and "Dawn Symphony." Peg lay curled in her armchair, studying the cloudscape. "Did you ever *see* anything so lovely?" The cloud plain was flat as polished ivory.

Jake nodded to starboard. "First sign of land."

A speck hung in the false dawn. Boosted vision brought it into focus—long leathery wings, a sharp pointed head, and the compact body of a pterosaur.

Peg hopped out of her chair. *"Quetzalcoatlus."* Another non-dinosaur—merely a huge flying reptile, but sufficiently incredible, a living creature with the wingspan of a small aircraft.

The pterosaur flew in formation with the crippled airship, narrow pointed wings not even beating, staying aloft through sheer mastery of the elements. Jake's microamps played "Riders on the Storm." Listening to the Doors, looking into *Quetzalcoatlus*' wrinkled face, Jake felt the full eeriness of this other earth, where birds had teeth and huge reptiles had wings and beaks.

He also sensed the same evolutionary tension. The pterosaur was big, beautiful, and otherworldly, but fragile as well. Great size meant small numbers and overspecialization. If *Quetzalcoatlus* faltered, who would take its place? Not another pterosaur, because there *were* no others. Replacement would come from the flocks of tiny birds which were growing ever more numerous.



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"But it's not a marine animal." Peg recorded and catalogued furiously.

"Exactly. We must be headed inland." Assuming the pterosaur knew its way home. "Perhaps it was blown out to sea by the storm."

"Something to put in the report," she declared. Her certainty amused him. Jake guessed that it was an even bet that he would never get to file on this run.

Ghostly landforms appeared on the chart table. He announced, "We're headed for the Texas coast." This late in the Cretaceous, the Lone Star State was just taking shape. Much of what would be coastal plain was still beneath the sea. The New Mexico highlands were steeper, not nearly so far inland.

In open-mouthed astonishment, he watched the coast's outline shift. *Storm surge.* Sea level was rising, submerging coastal islands, inundating lowlands. "This storm won't let go." Jake marveled at the flood. "Flats are filling up. There may be no place *to* land short of the highlands."

Dawn turned to day. The tempest whirled inland, losing velocity. Jake watched the tail end of the proto-Rockies poke up through the cloud plain. Black islands in a foamy white sea.

"Gorgeous." Peg was in rapture.

Jake scanned the mountain spine—no sign of a landing site. Ground speed was still formidable. Without power or aerodynamic control, *Challenger* would batter herself against the passes.

"Strap in." The crash rushing toward them shriveled hairs on his spine.

"But I can hardly see from that chair," Peg complained.

"We are going to hit badly." A wild understatement.

"Will being strapped down make a difference?"

"It might."

She shrugged, strapping the belt and harness across her body. It was plain that Peg did not plan to spend her last moments with her head between her knees. She meant to enjoy them. And record them. Her 3V was taking in everything.

Black pine tops broke through the clouds below; a high saddle lay dead ahead.

"Present course will terminate in three minutes." *Challenger* did not think they would make the saddle.

"Down five-hundred meters." No sense in staying up here. He had to find a landing spot, or all his maneuvering would only succeed in smearing them on the oncoming saddle. Pine tops grew larger. Jake's enhanced vision searched for a clearing.

*Challenger* gave a two-minute warning.

"Down fifty meters." Conifer forest reached up to tear the guts out of the airship. Still no gap in the canopy.

"One minute."

No clearing. No opening of any sort. Jake had to choose between rocks and treetops.

"Release remaining hydrogen." He braced himself.

Pine tops leaped at him. A giant sequoia slammed against the cabin,



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snapping and shuddering. Plastic shattered on impact; shards exploded through the lounge. Thrown against his straps, Jake heard *Challenger* cracking like an aluminum eggshell.

Metal shrieked as the cabin tore free from the hull. Another plunge. A jerk and fall, followed by a rain of debris.

Then silence, eerie in its completeness.

Alive enough to hurt, Jake hung face down in his straps, tasting blood and vomit in the back of his mouth. His head sang with pain.

Twisting about, he tried to look over at Peg. It was blacker hanging in the tree tops than it had been in the morning air above—the crushed and deflated hull formed a silver canopy, blocking the light. Rain dripped in. Through a screen of pine boughs he saw the back of her inflated chair.

"Peg, are you there?"

"Where else would I be? Was that it?"

"Was *what* it?"

"Are we going to fall some more?"

"*Hell*, I hope not!" A stupendous hunk of pine was thrust through the lounge into the chartroom; a meter more to port and it would have speared him on the way. It was thicker than Jake's waist, unlikely to break.

"Good." In a flurry of white limbs Peg unstrapped, dropping down to the rear bulkhead which had become a deck. She pushed aside the foliage. "What about you? Alive or dead?"

"Alive, I think."

"Great." She helped undo his straps. "How do you feel?"

"Like *shit* hammered through a small hole." The Mesozoic was still tumbling. Would his legs work? Apparently.

They knelt together on the bulkhead, feeling for breaks. First his limbs, then Peg's. Then they felt each other's bodies. Soon they were just feeling, then stroking and caressing. They kissed. His tongue still worked. "Sorry about the blood."

"Oh, I don't mind." Peg had the Look. That same dreamy half-smile he'd seen by the campfire in Hell Creek.

Fumbling to get his pants down, Jake could barely believe they were *finally* going to fuck—in a shattered cabin, halfway up a tree.

She watched him strip, showing almost clinical interest. "You know, this is the wildest thing I have ever done."

"Not nearly." He kicked his pants off. "The wildest thing you ever did was to pat that tyrannosaur on the nose."

She laughed. "The second wildest, anyway."

"Wrong again. The second wildest was when you . . ." He pulled her to him. Seeing all those yoga positions had given him some great ideas.

"I mean I have never done anything like this before."

"Never made love atop a sequoia after ramming into a mountain? It won't be near so hard as it sounds." He slid his hand between her legs. Peg felt as good as he'd imagined.

"No, I mean I have never made love. Not to a *man*."



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*"Shit and damnation."* His hand stopped. How could an attractive twenty-six-year-old not have had heterosex? "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I just did." She shrugged bare shoulders. "It makes this, you know, essential."

After sleeping half the night in a chair and caroming off a mountain, Jake was not sure how *essential* he could be. "Why didn't your sex therapist take care of this when you were a teenager?" Virginity had been cured ages ago.

"Sex therapy bored me. All those lectures on the joy of procreation."

"Right, I got the procreation lecture too." But it hadn't discouraged Jake from having heterosex—not completely at least. "So why are you starting now?"

"Because we *made* it. This is the *fucking* Mesozoic." She whacked her hand on his hip. "Besides, you saved my life. I owe you for that."

"Like *hell*. It's nothing but a plain everyday miracle we survived. You could just as well say I slammed you against a mountain, but didn't manage to kill you."

What a conversation to have with his hand in her crotch.

"Either way, you got me here." Peg wore an impish grin. Putting her hands on his cheeks, she kissed him again. "Ever since I was a girl hunting up fossils, I dreamed of coming here. I worked and bled until I was the best young Ph.D. in the field. But none of that mattered, until *you* picked me. Jake Bento did that. No one else."

"You knew that I picked you?"

"Of course." She caressed his chest with short graceful strokes.

"When you submit a proposal. it's *essential* to know who will judge it. If I can diagnose the personal life of a dead reptile from a shed tooth, I can certainly find out how FTL passes on its projects. To get here, I had to interest the right person."

"Me?"

"You, or someone like you. It was not hard to figure out what you'd want."

"I'll be *fucked*."

"First, we have to see how much I remember from comparative biology." Her hand slid between his hips. "So this is what the adult male organ feels like. I haven't held a penis since playing sex therapist in kindergarten. But that one was not so big and active."

Flattered, Jake felt himself respond.

"Oh look, an *erection*," she murmured. "This is fun!"

Her hips moved. Her breath came quicker. "You know, we could have done this that first night, after seeing the triceratops herd. But you crawled off to your cabin. I was too shy to go knocking on your door, making you think I was desperate."

Shy? At that point-instant, Jake knew it was never going to be easy with Peg. But there was no way he was going to stop—the woman was a prize, with more angles that a dodecahedron. He did his best to start slowly. It was her first time.



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He'd barely got going, when her eyes went wide, "Oh my, the cabin's shaking."

"It only feels that way." Jake was hitting his stride.

"No," she insisted, sitting bolt upright at the risk of giving him a hernia. "The whole tree is moving."

Jake felt it too. The cabin shook like it was getting set to fall again.

Seizing her recorder, she squirmed over to the window. "Jake, come look, it's a sauropod!" She lay there, aiming the recorder. "An *Alamosaurus*! I can almost count the teeth."

Jake saw the beast's head from where he lay, framed by Peg and the window. It was stripping greenery off a pine branch with short cylindrical teeth. One eye looked in at him.

Peg was not returning anytime soon, so he crawled over to be with her. No denying it. Alamosaurus was tremendous, a titanosaur in more than name. The head wasn't much larger than a horse's, but it was attached to a great wrinkled neck reaching far down into the foliage. The sauropod had half its thirty-ton bulk in the air, holding the sequoia with huge forelimbs.

Like all dinosaurs, it had that ancient, lord-of-creation look. Of course, sauropods were old, unbelievably ancient. They had seen continents separate and seas dry up, turning to shale and sandstone. The little protolemurs in the trees would come down, lose their tails, learn to walk upright and to build star ships, but they still would not be as old as late Cretaceous sauropods.

Magnificent. Inspired by the sauropod, Jake ran his hands over Peg's hips, starting again where they had left off.

She set her recorder down, rolling over to face him, eyes gleaming. "Do it. But quietly. Don't disturb the dinosaur."

He cocked his head toward the pine boughs and inflated furniture. "We can be more private and comfortable."

"No," she shook her head violently. "I want to see the sauropod. It'll be absolutely essential. I've waited all my life for this."

Whatever gets you going. At least Jake did not have to worry about being essential. Alamosaurus had seen to that.

He salvaged every necessity they could realistically carry—medikits, microstove, sleeping bags, and some provisions—using a winch and cables to lower them to the ground. Peg studied titanosaurs, tropical birds, small mammals, and the refinements of heterosex. Given the need for caution, and frequent fucking, it took Jake five days to get them down out of the tree.

Then they headed north, through the foothills of the proto-Rockies.

It took more than five months to walk back to Hell Creek, recording, collecting samples, sleeping in trees, living on whatever the medikits identified as edible. Jake could not imagine a more complete honeymoon.

Then it was over. They stood beside the same billabong they had begun at six months before, taking last looks at the Uppermost Cretaceous—Peg could barely stand to let it go.



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Systems check was a snap. He hardly had any equipment left. The missing shock-rifle no longer stood out in his report; it was neatly swallowed by bigger calamities, showing that it never pays to worry early. He saw a feud ahead with FTL. He had lost the reactor. He had crashed *Challenger*. Worst of all, he had hardly done half the assignment. Aside from the duckbills of Alabama, they had recorded nothing outside of Asiamerica. South America, Africa, India, and Australia-Antarctica were as mysterious as ever. The only fuck-ups he had *not* committed were calling in a STOP team, or losing his client.

But after five months in the foothills of the Rockies, their recorders could not hold a byte more of data. They were carrying an incalculable treasure. Highland species. Scores of new genera. Gene samples. Tissue cultures. DNA scans. Humanity's first look at the Mesozoic.

Fuck it. If FTL did not treat them like returning heroes, they would start their *own* agency. Call it Time Tours. Clients would climb all over them.

And he had added nicely to his artifact collection, finding another shed tooth, and a huge *Quetzalcoatlus* claw. Peg wanted to bring an egg. But she would have had to sit on it all the way Home. The incubator chamber had gone down with the reactor, and they were headed into winter.

Sweating, bundled up in spare clothing, Peg was finally overdressed. Jake cleared his head for the most dangerous part of the return. Riding a tropical hurricane was nothing compared to doing the blind drunkard's walk through a newly opened portal.

He engaged his navmatrix. The billabong, the flowering trees, the proto-birds—everything vanished.

Space-time blew about him, a near infinite number of point-instants thrown together by the anomaly. This time he was not lugging the reactor. The compweb beneath his scalp produced just enough drag to act as an anchor. He searched for the faint stirrings in the vortex that pointed to the far end of the anomaly. Luckily, he had been through this portal once already. His navmatrix projected a wispy gold filament—the path he had made on his first passage.

Each correct movement made the next one easier. Each mistake meant a possible portal skip to an unintended point-instant, the vast majority of which were in intergalactic vacuum.

He did not know they had made it until he saw snow-covered badlands and felt the howling Montana wind. "Light My Fire" throbbed in his microamps.

Four Hunkpapa warriors were sitting waiting by a fire, wrapped in buffalo robes. Wearing fur caps and winter leggings made from Mackinaw blankets, they gave Jake and Peg the flinty looks that passed for Lakota greetings. Their names were Swift Cloud, Bear Ribs, High Bear, and Sitting Bull, the Medicine Man and Strong Heart Chief. With the Hunkpapas was a forlorn, light-skinned Assiniboin boy, called Little Hohe. Hohe was the Lakota name for Assiniboins. The Hunkpapas had killed Little Hohe's family, and were taking him home for adoption.



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It was no longer the Mesozoic. Jake recognized the year Minniconjous called The Winter When Ten Crows Were Killed.

As Jake and Peg appeared out of the frigid air, Sitting Bull started to repack his redstone pipe—a sign that guests had arrived. "I see you, He-Who-Walks-Through-Winters."

"I see you, Sitting Bull." Jake knew sign language, and was fully programmed for Lakota. Peg had to make do with French.

"You have been gone long in the Spirit World, He-Who-Walks?"

Jake folded his legs and sat down across the fire from the Strong Heart Chief, settling naturally into a lotus pose Peg had taught him. "For me it has been six moons, maybe seven."

Sitting Bull's face crinkled up into a smile. "For us it has been only as long as it takes to light and smoke a pipe."

Jake made a sign that meant, "Marvelous are the ways of the Great Medicine." Lateral drift had deposited them a few minutes further along the time stream. Which was normal. You never came back to the exact same point-instant.

"Your Walking-Wagon did not come back with you," Sitting Bull observed.

"My Walking-Wagon went south." Jake smashed his hands together to describe the wreck of the reactor.

"It is good we have Hohe horses." Sitting Bull indicated a string of stolen ponies. He lit the pipe from the fire—offering a smoke to Grandmother Earth, Grandfather Sky, the Four Winds, and then to Jake.

Jake smoked, spreading out the gifts he had been gathering. Swift Cloud, Bear Ribs, and High Bear got shed tyrannosaurid teeth. He gave Sitting Bull the big *Quetzalcoatlus* claw. Little Hohe got only a few proto-bird feathers from Peg, but then, Sitting Bull had already given the boy his life.

Everyone was pleased by the presents from the Spirit World, saying they were *"Sha-sha,"* which meant, "Very red." Excellent. Sitting Bull added, "Will He-Who-Walks and Red Woman come back with us to the camp circle?"

*"You betcha,"* Jake accepted. The Hunkpapa laughed aloud. "You betcha," was Sitting Bull's favorite Americanism.

Jake helped Peg onto a stolen pony. The nearest nineteenth century portal was well to the south, but Sitting Bull's good will made them welcome in lodge circles as far as *Paha Sapa*, the Black Hills that sit at the Center of the World. He and Sitting Bull had always gotten on well, and seemed to be getting along even better now that Peg accompanied him. Sitting Bull liked to have striking women in camp, and had given Peg the name Red Woman—after his own first wife, who had also gone into the Spirit World.

Handing Peg her drag rope, Jake thought how remarkable Sitting Bull's taste in women was. Peg was *sha-sha*, very red, very excellent.

"We're in," he grinned. "Play our cards right, and Sitting Bull will



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throw us a wedding!" He-Who-Walks-Through-Winters and Red Woman rode off across the white landscape into the Winter When Ten Crows Were Killed.

All in all, Jake could not call it a bad run. . . .●

# NEXT ISSUE

Hugo-and-Nebula winner **Frederik Pohl** returns to these pages next month after too long an absence with our evocative March cover story, "The Martians." Pohl is one of the true giants of the field, a writer of immense power and versatility, and he amply demonstrates all of those qualities here, taking us to a future Mars mid-way through the process of terraforming for the thoughtful and thought-provoking story of a young boy's coming-of-age in the midst of the play of the immense cosmic forces reshaping Mars into a newer Earth . . . and the subtler forces also busy reshaping the human heart. Don't miss this one!

ALSO IN MARCH: **Charles Sheffield** takes us adventuring into the world of the ultra-small for a harrowing and deadly "Deep Safari"; hot new writer **Mary Rosenblum** takes us to a high-tech future for an intricate and powerful study of some very old-fashioned kinds of family relationships, in a pavane of love, betrayal, and identity entitled "Synthesis"; bestselling author **Mike Resnick,** fresh from his recent Hugo win for his Kirinyaga story "The Manamouki," published here in July 1990, returns with the latest Kirinyaga story, one in which Koriba's implacable will is pitted against that of his own people, as he attempts to teach them the bitter "Song of a Dry River"; new writer **Maureen McHugh** returns with an unsettling and deceptively simple little story that affords us a rare glimpse of "The Beast"; **S.A. Stolnack** returns after a long absence to detail a terrifying encounter with some of the strange hidden Powers of the universe, in the scary "Straw for the Fire"; and new writer **Diane Mapes,** making a sprightly *IAsfm* debut, spins the wry and funny story of some of the things that can go delightfully awry when "Love Walks In." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our March issue on sale on your newsstands on February 4, 1992.

COMING SOON: big new stories by **Isaac Asimov, L. Sprague de Camp, Michael Swanwick, Connie Willis, Robert Silverberg, Elizabeth Hand, Tony Daniel, Avram Davidson, Rebecca Ore, Steven Utley,** and many more.



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# ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

## Kidnapped by Aliens!

**Stranger Suns**
By George Zebrowski
Bantam, $4.50 (paper)

As you might guess from the subhead for this review, George Zebrowski's latest novel has as its base an event straight from those tabloids you pretend you're not reading while waiting at the supermarket checkout. However, being from the sciencefictionally sophisticated Mr. Zebrowski, *Stranger Suns* goes into realms that leave the average tabloid reader about a thousand or so parsecs behind, and, I must confess, tripped me up once or twice, too.

In a dreary future earth that is nearly an ecological ruin, Juan Obrion runs a small scientific project that searches for tachyons from space which might prove to be signs of Someone Out There. UN Earth Resources Security spares the money for this because it's a pittance, but things start hopping when Obrion gets a tachyon signal from the Antarctic, of all places, and he and a UN-ERS team discover (in a scene that inevitably brings back memories of a classic scene from a classic movie), a huge spherical spaceship buried in the ice. Obrion and three comrades venture aboard to find it deserted of anything recognizable as sentient life, but before they know it, the ship has taken off. It seems to have an itinerary based on maintenance and energy. They learn eventually that it draws power from a net of stars, with fueling stations in the very core of a series of stars. The stations are located in hyperspace but they are congruent with a star's position in our space.

The situation becomes more and more complex as they discover more ships, various shuttles, and eventually a series of matter transmitters from ship to ship. They find themselves on other planets and eventually, by matter transmitter, on a ship that has been left buried in the Amazon jungle, from which they dig themselves out. (Their track had been so complex at this point that the reader had been praying that they had left a trail of breadcrumbs.)

Ah, but that's not all the sneaky Mr. Zebrowski has up his sleeve—it seems that the matter transmitters lead to alternate time tracks, opening up even more territory for our lost adventurers to keep track of (as it were). They find that a teammate who had been killed earlier in an accident during their journey is alive on this new Earth; he hadn't gone with them. And on this Earth and several congruent ones, there has been a nu-



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clear war. . . .

Zebrowski has come up with a very complex novel here, as the protagonists search for ways to control or chart "the web," and for some concrete evidence of what's become of its builders. His book ranges eventually from physics to metaphysics and philosophizing; his hero finds himself more and more disenchanted with humanity, and one eventually gets such dialogue (when he's asked what are rational grounds for the infinite expanse of superspace) as ". . . A secular ontological proof. Informally speaking, it asserts that a zero field, or nothing, is logically contradictory, as well as being physically and psychologically impossible. . . . What we call space is a full plenum." *Not* for the faint-hearted (or faint-minded).

## Pharaonic Phun

**The Pharaoh Contract (The Emancipator, Book 1)**
By Ray Aldridge
Bantam, $4.50 (paper)

I hope Ray Aldridge will not be too irked if I say that his first novel, *The Pharaoh Contract,* reminds me of an Edgar Rice Burroughs Mars book (or any ERB book—he was not an author known for the vast range of his style or plots). Oh, it's a zillion times more sophisticated conceptually than old Edgar ever thought of being—implanted neural nets and medical limpets were way beyond his horizon. And there're some touches of sex and violence that would have given the moralistically Victorian Burroughs a case of the fantods. After all, he would send any number of Barsoomian warriors happily to their deaths to preserve the honor [i.e., chastity] of Princess Dejah Thoris. (I should add that Aldridge is one of the few current authors who can throw in some necessarily à la mode sex and violence without seeming exploitative.)

No, I think it's the speed and coolness with which our John Carteresque protagonist, Ruiz Aw, jumps in and out of precarious situations; his inevitable captures and just as inevitable escapes, from palaces and slave pens and lecherous females. It's a long time since I've run into so insouciant a hero.

Ruiz's "Pangalic" universe is not a very nice one, since through most of it slavery is an established and legal fact of life. And given the bewildering number of life forms around—humans, modified humans, aliens of all sorts—you can get a sentient being in almost any shape or designer color for almost any purpose (if you have the money, of course). Abolitionists are a force, but not by any means a dominant one. Ruiz works for the "Art League," a mischievously entitled consortium that deals in slaves, but only on the most legitimate level. (". . . the foremost supplier of sapient merchandise in the galaxy for over three thousand years.") Ruiz acts as a sort of hired gun for them, and is to be sent to the planet Pharaoh to find out who's rustling slaves from there (the planet is particularly noted for its skilled conjurors). However, Ruiz discovers that he has been planted with a death net, that will broadcast the time and circumstances of his death when (if) it happens. This is hardly standard



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procedure, which means that there's something more to this mission than slave-rustling.

Pharaoh is one of the less delightful worlds in this less-than-delightful universe, having been colonized by mistake—its only habitable area is a vast plateau that rises above a roiling swamp out of which come really nasty things. The natives have forgotten their off-planet origins and specialize in fancy executions with thaumaturgic overtones. If one of these events is of truly superior quality, the participants are "translated to heaven," i.e., whisked off by the legit slavers.

Ruiz disguises himself as a snake-oil peddler (the lowest kind of magician) and throws himself into this uncouth culture (which has pseudo-Egyptian overtones —*very* pseudo). Of course, he winds up being carried off as part of a particularly good execution, and falls in love with the executed-to-be, who luckily survives. From there on, it's whirlwind action and a good time is had by all, including the reader. Stand warned that this is "Book 1" of a series, and while it doesn't exactly end with a cliff-hanger, and the principals are momentarily safe, the finale is hardly conclusive—"to be continued" is definitely implied.

## Out of the Woods

**The Wooden Sword**
By Lynn Abbey
Ace, $4.50 (paper)

In her new novel, *The Wooden Sword*, Lynn Abbey has given us a fascinatingly complex magic world and a rather unexpected time in that world. It is just *after* a major war between the mighty, and the factors in this novel are not concerned with the big forces at work, but with much smaller matters. We're filled in fairly succinctly in an opening chapter (thank Heaven!—an author who believes in telling us something) that gods are a dime a dozen in Walensor's World; they are natural forces personified and depersonified as their believer cultures come and go.

The mages of Walensor are the forces of good, who have created the greatest magic artifact on the world, the Walensor Web. It is made of pure *basi*, the life gift through which magic expresses itself, and covers the land like a domed roof. Essentially, it's like a computer network—the most powerful sorcerers can write and (as it were) fax what they want through it. The less powerful "hedge-sorcerers" which every village has can at least tune in and get the news.

The story opens in the rather squalid rural village of Gorse, different from other such only in that it worships only the forest goddess Weycha, since it is built on lands cultivated from her forest, only a small bit of which is left. The inhabitants have celebrated the victory of Walensor, news of which they have received through the Web, and the young shepherdess Berika has a hangover. Venturing too near what remains of Weycha's forest, she sees a "fetch" across the stream, a supernatural creature that breaks all tradition by crossing the stream and becoming human. He/it insists he was sent to guard "the lady" plus babbling a good deal of other nonsense, but Berika finds herself stuck with



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him, to her discomfiture and the scandal of her family and the other villagers.

Blessed with a certain amount of *basi,* Berika has still never been able to reach the Web. She's also promised to her brutish cousin who was a swine even *before* he was maimed in the war. She decides to go to the city of the Web, Eyerlon, to get away from her people and to find out if the man who has "adopted" her is fetch, demon, or human. He has no memories, only a wooden harp and a wooden sword, gifts of the lady of the wood.

Once we get away from dreary Gorse, the action moves swiftly and intriguingly. However, I'm afraid I was put off by the two main characters. Dart, the "fetch"? demon? human?, is deliberately a cipher, of course, but as he gains knowledge and memories, he does not gain the reader's concern. Berika is a type of "heroine" that I've run into before, almost always conceived by women, much to my mystification. She snivels, cries, procrastinates, refuses good advice and distrusts people (Dart, for instance) who obviously mean her well. I wanted a lot to like her, but just couldn't get around to it. This, by the way, is another of those novels in which there is something of a resolution—everyone is more or less safe—but which has "to be continued" writ in invisible letters at the end.

## The Smug & the Smuggler

**Drifter**
By William C. Dietz
Ace, $3.95 (paper)

Contrariwise, the two main characters in William Dietz's *Drifter* are anything but original—the light-hearted villain and the religiously dedicated female are hardly a new idea in couplings—but Dietz has a suave and easy way with characters and you like these two right away.

Pik Lando is a sensible small time smuggler in a multi-sentient raced, multi-inhabited planet universe. He's inherited the talent and know-how from his father, and owns a ship that is as beat up as cosmetic metalwork can make her, while deep down inside she's a speed whiz ("Speed is a smuggler's best friend" is one of the interminable sayings of Lando's father).

Dr. Wendy Wendeen belongs to a religious sect that seems almost too good to be true: no ministers, no priests, no enforced rules; life should be simple, nonviolent, and productive. They are pacifist and vegetarian, and only a touch smug. And they are, of course, persecuted.

There are many habitable planets being discovered, exploited and sold, and Wendy's Church of Free Choice has been able to buy half of one, a very unpromising lump of rock that nevertheless has one of the most beautiful skies in the galaxy, dominated by a huge glowing silver ring like a halo—the planet is called, of course, Angel. Alas, the other half of Angel has been purchased by a huge mining corporation which has discovered all sorts of profitable stuff there, and is, of course, out to get the Church's half, with much hanky panky, dishonesty, and threat of the violence that the Church cannot commit.

Due to circumstances too complicated to go into, Wendy finds her-



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self sent off to the planet HiHo to find a smuggler to bring in a load of fertilizer. Fertilizer? Yes, fertilizer. She, of course, turns up Pik Lando, who willy nilly gets involved in this seemingly one-sided battle. Why? Because he is, of course, a hero underneath and he is in love with Wendy. The relationship between these two of opposite philosophies is both amusing and touching, and the well paced novel takes us to the solar system and back, with an ingenious weapon ("Dr. Bob's magnificent metal munchers") and lots of action and original touches. Read this one just for fun. You won't regret it.

## Classic!

### *The Ship of Ishtar*

By A. Merritt

Collier, $4.95 (paper)

Due to circumstances beyond my control, this is going to be a non-review. I guess I'd better explain that statement. . . .

The reviewer, at least to one's thinking, has to walk a fine line. S/he must, of course, continue to remind the reader that s/he is but human (*knowledgeably* human, of course), and not Jehovah thundering down pontifically (to slightly mix a Christian metaphor) with the only opinion possible. On the other hand, s/he must always be slightly inhumanly objective, allowing no personal bias but the merit of the work to influence the opinion.

Now there ain't no way in the world this reviewer is going to be objective about A. Merritt's glorious fantasy, *The Ship of Ishtar*. Instructive, yes. Objective, no. Back in the days just before the middle of the century, when *The Hobbit* was yet to be, and Howard was mostly considered a second-rate blood and thunder Burroughs, *the* fantasy writer was Abraham Merritt. Now this is curious, since of his handful of novels, half are thrillers of the master-criminal genre then popular, with fantasy overtones. The other half is really SF of the lost-race, lost-super science category (and wondrous and beautiful they are—the superhuman alien trio of *The Moon Pool* is among the most extraordinary such ever conceived). The only true fantasy of the lot is *The Ship of Ishtar;* it is the first adult fantasy I ever read, and, I repeat, no way can I be objective about it. It conquered me then and it conquers me now, and there's no use going into much detail about the plot.

Very simply, John Kenton, a young archaeologist, finds a jeweled ship embedded in a stone block from Babylon, and is drawn into a strange world where the gods of Babylon are real. He finds himself on the ship, a sort of Babylonian Flying Dutchman, physically divided in half between the forces of Ishtar, personified by her priestess Sharane, and the forces of the dark god, Nergal. The ship is cursed to rove this world of Babylonian mythology forever, but Kenton's presence breaks the stalemate, and from galley slave on the ship of Ishtar, he rises to win Sharane, best Nergal, and then . . .

Is there more of a tour de force in fantasy than the chapter in which Kenton climbs the seven-layered tower of Bel, hearing the voice of



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Nabu, god of wisdom, announcing the names and attributes of the seven major gods as he reaches each of their levels? Purple pulp prose, say some these days. Poetry of a kind not found in fantasy these days, say the reactionaries, since it is neither whimsical or brutal, neither Tolkienesque or Howardly.

One more thing should be noted. The combination of Merritt's work and the illustrations of the great fantasy artist, Virgil Finlay, fitted together like one single artistic mind at work; the combination is extraordinary. This new paperback edition features the great Finlay b&w interior illustrations. Despite one of the ugliest covers ever made, it is a gift of the gods.

## Shoptalk

*Anthologies, etc. . . .Gravity's Angels* is a handsome, illustrated (by Janet Aulisio) collection of Michael Swanwick's short stories (Arkham House, $20.95).

*Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot* . . . Jack Vance's *Ecce and Old Earth* is a sequel to *Araminta Station* and the second of the "Cadwal Chronicles" (Tor, $21.95) . . . Harry Turtledove's *Krispos of Videssos* is Book II of "The Tale of Krispos," the first of which was highly diverting, especially for the historically minded (Del Rey, $5.95, paper) . . . *Playgrounds of the Mind* is the sequel to Larry Niven's *N-Space*, a collection of stories and excerpts from longer works (and some works in progress) covering the second half of Niven's writing career (Tor, $22.95).

*Small presses, bless 'em* . . . Finally all of Avram Davidson's off-the-wall Doctor Eszterhazy stories have been collected in one volume, and a handsome volume it is, too, with decorations on each page. (Only a partial collection has appeared before). This particular good doctor operates out of the empire of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania. Given the reBalkanization of the Balkans these days, speaking of the new world order, this just might turn out to be real (and what's happening in Ruritania, Graustark, and Margravia, come to think of it?). In any case, it's a delight (Owlswick Press, Box 8243, Philadelphia, PA 19101, $24.50).

Miscellaneous . . . *The Jungle* by David Drake is set in the same universe (and planet, for that matter) as the great Henry Kuttner's *Clash By Night*. They've been published in one volume, and even if Drake weren't the rousing writer he is, any reprint by Kuttner is worth having (Tor, $18.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1393 Rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada. ●

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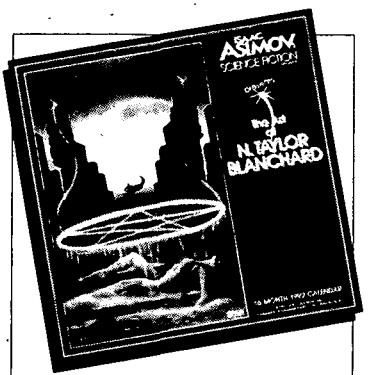


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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Join ConFrancisco, the 1993 WorldCon, before rates rise at the end of the year. Plan a social weekend with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. When calling (early evening's good), say why you're calling right off. Look for me at cons with the Filthy Pierre badge and musical keyboard.

## JANUARY 1992

17-19—**RustyCon.** For info, write: **Box 84291, Seattle WA 98124.** Or phone: **(206) 938-4844** (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Seattle WA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Airport Hilton. Guests will include: Spider and Jeanne Robinson, artist Mark Ferrari, fan "Dragon."

17-19—**SerCon. (404) 578-8461.** Wyndham Southpark, Austin TX. J. Carroll. For fans of written SF.

17-19—**ChattaCon. (615) 842-7130.** Read House, Chattanooga TN. Frankowski, Cherryh, Watt-Evans.

24-26—**BamaCon, Box 6542, U. AL, Tuscaloosa AL 35486. (205) 758-4577.** Clement, Cherryh, Fancher.

24-26—**SwanCon, Box 318, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.** Perth's annual West Australian convention.

31-Feb. 2—**FourPlay, 2 Crarthie Rd., Vicar's Cross, Chester CH3 5JL, UK.** SF folksinging con.

## FEBRUARY 1992

7-9—**PsurrealCon, Box 2069, Norman OK 73070.** Tad Williams, R. Bailey, Bill Hodgson, C. Hamilton.

14-16—**Boskone, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 625-2311.** Springfield MA. Jane Yolen.

14-16—**EclectiCon, Box 19040, Sacramento CA 95819. (408) 225-0569.** No guests *are confirmed yet.*

14-16—**Masque, % Melusine, 5 Wentbridge Path, Borehamwood, Herts. W6D 4ET, UK.** SF costuming.

14-16—**ChimeraCon, Kingswood Apts. #H-6, Chapel Hill NC 27514.** At the UNC Student Union.

28-Mar. 1—**ConCave, Box 24, Franklin KY 42134. (502) 586-3366.** At the Park Mammoth Resort, KY.

28-Mar. 1—**Corflu, 15931 Kalisher, Granada Hills CA 91344.** Cockatoo Motel, Hawthorne CA.

29-Mar. 1—**Regency Assembly, 15931 Kalisher, Granada Hills CA 91344.** Same place as con above.

## MARCH 1992

6-8—**WolfCon, Box 796, Wolfville NS B0P 1X0. (902) 542-9306.** SF, fantasy, gaming, multi-media.

6-8—**ConSonance, Box 29888, Oakland CA 94604. (800) 866-9245 or (415) 763-6415.** SF folksinging.

## SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $95 to 3/31/92.

## SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. #1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598.** San Francisco CA. $85.

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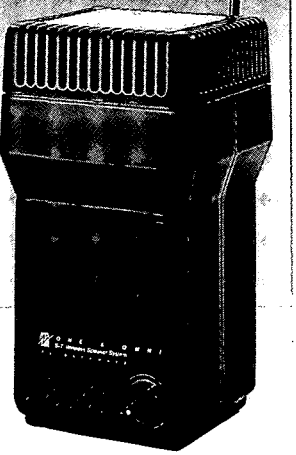

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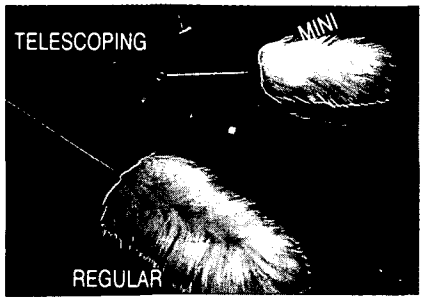


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